

“Three-in-One”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

June 7, 2020 Trinity Sunday

Based upon Acts 4:32-35; Phil. 2:1-11

There once was an anthropologist who went to Africa to study the habits and cultures of some of the tribes there. Wanting to make a good impression on the tribe in one village, he made up a basket filled with delicious fruit from the region and wrapped it with a ribbon. He placed the basket under a tree, and then gathered the children of the village together. “This basket is a prize for whomever is fastest in the village,” he said. “When I tell you to start, run to that tree, and whoever gets there first will be the winner and get the basket.” The children lined up as told, but when the visitor told them to run, they took each other’s hands and ran together to the tree. Then they sat down, passed out the fruit, and enjoyed the treat together as a group. The anthropologist was surprised. He asked, “Why did you run together, when one of you could have had all the fruit for yourself?” One of the children looked up at him quizzically and said, “How can one of us be happy if all the other ones are sad?”¹

If only people in our country would ask themselves this more often! Most people have discovered during the pandemic that they do miss community. Human beings are not solitary beings; we crave human interaction if we don’t get it. But although we miss our friends and the distant family members, it is clear from what’s going on in our nation now that we have not yet fully recognized the responsibilities which flow from our social nature. We will not be our best selves, our true selves, unless or until we care about the health and happiness of others as we do ourselves, and work together for the blessing of the whole community. In African countries like Zimbabwe and South Africa, that truth is captured by a single word: *ubuntu*. Ubuntu is an ancient ethical concept for how to live life in community, summarized by the maxim: “A person is a person through other people.”² In the Church, that truth is captured by the affirmation in *Genesis* that we were made in the image and likeness of God.

Today on Trinity Sunday, and every other Sunday too, Christians affirm that our God is three-in-one. We know God as our Creator; we know God as Jesus the Christ; and we know God as the Holy Spirit. Although this seems to some like we have three gods, to us, these three are all one and the same God. As I told the children, in the same way that a single table can have three legs and needs all three of them to be the table that it is, the Godhead is one and three at the same time. God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit live in an eternal dance together. Christ is in God and God in Christ. Christ is in the Holy Spirit and the Spirit was in Christ. We may have different names for these different ways of knowing God, but they are all the same God. This is what we are celebrating today— that the God who made the universe, the God who walked the earth in Christ and died and rose for humanity, the God that swooped down like fire on the disciples enabling them to create the Church is one God, and the very same God who is with us now. That means we have access to the God of Abraham, to the God who turned water into wine, and to the God

¹ Clear, James, “How to Be Happy: A Surprising Lesson on Happiness from an African Tribe,” at <https://jamesclear.com/how-can-i-be-happy-if-you-are-sad>.

² Metz, Thaddeus, “What Archbishop Tutu’s ubuntu credo teaches the world about justice and harmony,” *The Conversation*, Oct. 4, 2017; retrieved June 3, 2020 from <https://theconversation.com/what-archbishop-tutus-ubuntu-credo-teaches-the-world-about-justice-and-harmony-84730>

who breathes new life into dry bones. Our Triune God is one God in three persons, one God, who made and saved and sustains us all.

That, in and of itself, is an extraordinary affirmation. But *Genesis* Chapter One makes another one which is just as bold and thought-provoking. It says that our God made human beings in God's image and likeness. This single statement has led to volumes of speculation over time. Does this mean that God looks like a human being? That can't be possible since both men and women were made in the image of God. Does it mean that certain traits in us are godlike like our intellects or creativity? I've preached on this before, so I'm not going to unpack all of the theories again now. Suffice it to say that the interpretation of this phrase that resonates with many scholars the most, and with me as well, is that "to be made in the image and likeness of a triune God" is to be made to live in community, not isolation. As ubuntu affirms, so the Bible also affirms: we become our true selves through the way that we live through God and others.

Now as we have seen all too well in recent years, and especially the past week, there is a big difference between living in the vicinity of others and living as a healthy and happy community. There is also a difference between living in the communities we establish and living in the community that God established in Christ. Theologian Rene Girard has written extensively about this.³ He said that the main way that humans create community is by grouping together based upon some kind of commonality. Whether we use gender, skin color, orientation, nationality, religion, favorite sports teams, or favorite politicians doesn't matter; the effect is always the same. We create groups of "us" and "them." To make matters worse, we then usually strengthen our communities by scapegoating the "them." We are the ones who like this; not like "those people" who like that. We are the ones who believe this; not like "those people" who believe that. If only everyone was like us the world would be at peace, but as long as "those people" keep ruining things that will be impossible.

Even the Israelites, God's chosen people in the Old Testament, created community this way. The Ten Commandments were supposed to prevent that, but they never followed them enough to discover this. They continued to divide themselves internally and externally in the usual ways: rich versus poor, urban versus rural dwellers, Israelites versus foreigners. That is not the kind of community God had in mind, which is why Jesus talked incessantly about a different kind of community called the kingdom of God. In the kingdom of God, people love God with heart, mind, soul, and strength and their neighbors as themselves. In the kingdom of God, the strong care for the weak, there is justice for all, and greatness is measured by how well you serve, not how powerful or popular you are. In case his disciples missed the difference between the divine community he was describing and the kind they were inclined to, Jesus then made his point in the most unambiguous and surprising way possible: he refused to identify a "them" while dying on the cross. He never blamed his murderers; instead, he saved them along with everyone else. He took on the role of scapegoat, so that we would see that we no longer need one.

³ See e.g. Wieser, Thomas, "Community— Its Unity, Diversity and Universality," in *SEMEIA* 33 Rene Girard and Biblical Studies, Andrew J. McKenna, ed., (Decatur: Society for Biblical Literature, 1985), 83-95.

Paul made this point to the Christians in Philippi by including in his letter a hymn which notes that although Jesus was “in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross.” Did you notice the play on “likenesses” here? God made humanity in God’s image and likeness. Then God came as Christ in our likeness to show us how to be the human beings God made us to be. Christ was a humble servant. He wasn’t power-hungry. He wasn’t self-glorifying or self-centered. He served others even to the point of death. “Have the same mind as Christ,” Paul advised. “Don’t make your life about division. Make it about living in community, in oneness with God and neighbor.”

The early Church really tried to do this, as we heard in the lesson from *Acts* today. Much of the *Book of Acts* is about the disciples’ attempts to create and define community as Jesus did instead of as the world does. In today’s lesson we learn that one way they did this was by pooling all of their resources and then redistributing them so that no one would be in need. As the text explains, their sharing not only ensured that everyone was happy, it also witnessed to the fact that there was “great grace” upon them. No one had ever shared to this degree before. Over time as Paul did more church planting, the other core principal that Jesus embodied with his life was added to the Christian communities Paul was forming in Christ’s name. They had to be inclusive— for “there is no longer Jew or Gentile, male or female, slave or free,” Paul explained. “We are all one in Christ.” (Gal. 3:28). In other words, their oneness, their unity, came not from being the same, but from their relationship with God. They loved God, so that made them love their neighbors; and then because their neighbors received love, they came to love God. It wasn’t a perfect circular dance like the Trinity, but it was a sort of relational triangle designed to enable them to be the people God had made and saved them to be, people made in the image of God, who lived through God and one another.

In our day, when people read today’s text from *Acts*, instead of being inspired, they tend to get defensive: “That’s socialism or communism! I’m not going to give up all my property for Christ.” Knowing that I am not willing to do that either, I understand that reaction. But in between the extreme of “this is mine- get your own” and the extreme of “nothing is mine- it’s all for the community,” there remains a lot of wiggle room to try to find a way to live more as a “we” than we have been. Knowing that us-versus-them thinking is not the way of God, we can strive to expand the “us” in our minds and hearts. Knowing that the divine “table” in us needs them to be whole, we can strive to see others as essential parts of us instead of as strangers or enemies. Knowing that we are our true selves when we take into account the needs of God and our neighbors, we can let go of our competitiveness, and embrace sharing, serving, creative problem solving, and community building like never before.

The great Christian ethicist, H. Richard Niebuhr, called doing this embracing “the ethics of the fitting,” or practicing a “triadic form of life.”⁴ Instead of focusing on what is good or right, which tends to lead to us-versus-them thinking, we should ask ourselves, “What is ‘fitting’ in light of that relational triangle God implanted within us?” An action cannot be right if it

⁴ Niebuhr, H. Richard, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1963), 55-68.

benefits us, but hurts our neighbors, nor can it be good if it benefits us and our neighbors but is contrary to the will of God. We must take into account the other two points on our triangle as if we, like the boys in the race, were linked hand to hand, and can only enjoy the prize if we get to the finish line together. We must do this because to do anything less will not only cause *them* to experience pain and sadness, it will also deny who *we* were made to be.

Noah Webster once said, “Whatever makes us good Christians makes us good citizens.”⁵ That’s a tricky statement these days when we don’t all agree on what makes a good Christian. But if we set aside all our denominational preferences and definitions in favor of the triadic way of living that Christ both embodied and called us to embrace, then Webster was right. When we love God and neighbor as self, we will be good citizens too because our measure of whether we win or lose will be the health and joy of the community. We will wear masks even if that limits our freedom if doing so protects another. We will work for justice for the oppressed, even if we aren’t oppressed, because it’s the fitting thing to do. Christ calls us to create a world where everyone’s needs are met, and where we live together in diversity as one. It may not seem like an achievable goal, and it wouldn’t be if we tried to go it alone. But the good news of the Gospel is that the God who knows better than anyone how to be three-in-one is part of our triangle, and even now showing us the way. May the Spirit of God who lives and dwells with Christ and the Creator and also lives with us, inspire us to love and serve for God’s sake, our sake, and the sake of all our neighbors in the world. Amen.

⁵ As cited in Cloud, David, “Noah Webster: A Great American,” Way of Life Literature, Sept. 24, 2010, at https://www.wayoflife.org/reports/noah_webster_a_great_american.html, citing Webster, Noah, “moral habits,” American Dictionary of the English Language, 1828.