

“The Community of God”

The world can become a lonely place when we give others too much credit. I don't mean that we shouldn't give others the benefit of the doubt; that's different. But we shouldn't automatically assume that other people have it all together whenever we don't. We have a tendency to think that others don't struggle with the things we struggle with: partnering or parenting or balancing work and relationships or whatever. And maybe the best example is church.

We tend to assume that other people have their theology together, know what they actually think and believe and have few if any qualms about finding themselves sitting in church on a beautiful holiday weekend. “They” really understand the Lord's Prayer, we imagine, and mean it when they say it. Throughout the service these “other people” focus on holy thoughts and aren't bothered by the cartoon-like stream of consciousness we've got going on, bouncing from what we had or didn't have for breakfast to the preacher's footwear to what it might be like to swing from those great big chandeliers we've got in here to how we could be gardening or golfing or fishing or whatever. Other people don't do that, do they? Of course they do: cut yourself some slack, you fit in a lot better than you think. As Red Green says, “We're all in this together.” As we say, “You're always welcome here.”

So relax... and let's talk about church doctrine. “Doctrine” is the official teaching of the church, the collection of time-honored ideas we've all heard about but often regard with suspicion. I mean, that's part of why you're here at Plymouth and not someplace else, right? We could make a list of such ideas: original sin, predestination, divine judgment, incarnation (and just for good measure, reincarnation), justification by faith, the atonement, the second coming. Are you feeling your eyes glaze over?

Generally here at Plymouth we try to keep things relatively simple, reminding ourselves on a weekly basis that, as Jesus said, it all boils down to love of God and neighbor. But theology has its place, particularly when we consider that if we are to love God with all our heart and soul, strength and *mind*, theology is essentially how we love God with our minds.

And consider this: we become like what we worship. If we envision God as a bearded man sitting on the clouds watching us fail to keep an impossible set of rules and knowing if we've been bad or good so be good for goodness' sake... then over time we are more likely to become stern, unyielding and self-righteous. If on the other hand we think of God as benevolent, forgiving and generous, we are more likely to be forgiving of ourselves and others; and to be generous in spirit and with our possessions. How we think about God really matters. And how we come to terms with some of the great theological constructs of our heritage makes a difference in how we think about God.

So how about this ancient idea: the Trinity? Did you notice that it's Trinity Sunday? We don't generally have weekends dedicated to theological constructs, but the Sunday after Pentecost is always Trinity Sunday. It's as though at this point in the year they've all finally checked in: God the Father/Mother, Jesus Christ, and now finally the Holy Spirit, who showed up last week; so today we devote some time to wondering how they're getting along.

True confession, here: I've generally not gotten too excited about the Trinity, regarding it as something of a brain teaser, the theological equivalent of a tongue-twister: Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers selling seashells down by the seashore where black bugs bleed black blood. That's kind of entertaining but not very enlightening. God is three yet at the same time God is one: always reminds me of three-in-one oil. The Trinity is a stumbling block when it comes to interfaith dialogue, when Muslims and Jews who are really clear about the oneness of God look at us and suspect that if we were honest we'd admit that we've got three gods going. The Trinity has never had too much to say to me beyond the reminder that I don't have God all figured out, theology is basically poetry anyway and when it comes to God we can always fall back on a sense of awe and mystery. So mostly I tend to let the Trinity alone; and I hope that resonates with you because I don't want to eschew my own counsel and give you too much credit.

But then, because we don't think about the Trinity very much, when something like the novel *The Shack* comes along it seems astounding.¹ In

¹ Although I don't commend *The Shack* without some reservation, it does an imaginative job of introducing important theological ideas such as the Trinity and the problem of evil in ways that invite us to think theologically about our own lives. If you're interested, it's a quick read and probably worth your time. The author is William P. Young. (Newbury Park, California: Windblown Media, 2007.)

The Shack, God is portrayed as an African-American grandmother named Papa and a thirty-something carpenter and an Asian woman. The book explores the relationships among these three and how they can be three and one at the same time; and because the persons of this trinity don't conform to the stained glass images in our heads the story seems revolutionary. Folks have told me it has blown their minds and changed their lives: Why didn't you tell me God isn't an old man sitting on the clouds? But it turns out that folks, particularly in the Eastern Church, have been thinking about the triune God as this sort of community for a very long time.

A way for us to enter the conversation today is offered by this morning's lesson. It's an odd and unusual thing chosen by the lectionary committee especially for Trinity Sunday; and it opens us to the same kind of mind stretching that folks find in *The Shack*.

The passage comes from Proverbs, part of the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible. Proverbs contains lots of strings of catchy aphorisms—what some folks wish we had more of in the Bible. It is associated with King Solomon and his bloated reputation for wisdom, and it presents itself as a body of instruction for princes. Most likely all the different writings and sayings in Proverbs were collected by palace scribes over many years; and the book took its present form some time after the Babylonian exile.

Our lesson for today comes from one of the most famous portions of Proverbs, an extended section in which Wisdom is personified as a woman. To know her is to find truth and righteousness and a full and abundant life. She appears in contrast to a different sort of woman who leads young princes astray.

In our passage Wisdom calls out in invitation to all people. She calls on the heights, along the road and by the gates of the city. She invites everyone to know the fullness of life that comes from living wisely; that is, living a godly life. Wisdom is eternal. She was created at the beginning before creation, so that she was a co-creator with God. Before oceans or mountains or earth existed, she was alongside God as a partner and master worker, rejoicing in God and in the good creation they were bringing forth together. To know her is to know our true origin and purpose and to know the meaning of life.

Many commentators have pointed out what seems obvious about this passage: how it is echoed in the Gospel of John in what John says about Jesus. There the image is not the woman, Wisdom, but the Word of God,

Jesus. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him...”² Notice how John seems to go a step beyond Proverbs: Wisdom is created as the beginning of creation; the Word was in the beginning with God. In commenting on the Proverbs passage, Richard Clifford observes that John portrays Jesus, “... as incarnate wisdom descended from on high to offer human beings light and truth.”³ In John, Jesus is both with God, and *is* God.

Today’s passage is particularly helpful in jumpstarting our thinking about the Trinity because it portrays a feminine person of God and introduces the concept of God as a relationship. When we say that God is love we often think of love as a noun, a thing, fixed and static. But love is also a verb, active and moving. We can think of God as the interaction among the persons of the Trinity, the living, moving love among them. So God becomes not a fixed and static entity like an individual person, but a community: embodying diversity and interacting in ways that are fluid, creative and joyful... like a dance. God is not remote and unfeeling, immovable and stern; God is living, moving and changing like a kaleidoscope—constantly revealed in new and breathtakingly beautiful ways. When we encounter one form we particularly like, we want to stop the movement and fix it right there; but God continues to change, and to be revealed in new and startlingly wonderful configurations.

So think about this: we never have God nailed down. We never have God figured out. And that’s not just because God is a fixed and static mystery that is too big for our minds to encompass; it’s because the living, moving, still-speaking God keeps changing. And God cannot be captured any more than a single frame from a motion picture can contain all the nuanced interaction within it. So different people can talk about God in different ways... and all of them can be speaking truth... or at least a part of it. That’s one implication of the idea of the Trinity.

Another is that when we are called into relationship with God we are called into community. Sometimes God seems more approachable as Mother or Father, sometimes as Jesus Christ, sometimes as the Holy Spirit that blows where it will and inspires, equips and emboldens us for the living of faithful lives. But God is all of these things all at the same time; or, more

² John 1:1-3a.

³ *The Access Bible*, introduction to Proverbs. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 808.

properly, God is the loving interaction among all of these, and so calls us into community to participate in the dance that is God.

We tend to regard religion as being about our private and solitary relationship with a solitary and self-contained God—to think of relating to God as we might a person. But we can also think about relating to God as we would be part of a community of welcome that invites us to bring our deepest and truest selves into the adventure of relationship.

And, if you're still with me, we may then begin to think of the church as a reflection of God. We sometimes call ourselves the body of Christ. But another way to think of the church is as the community of God, a community that embodies diversity as God does, that engages in ongoing interaction and relationship as God does, that points however imperfectly to the love—as a verb—that is God. So the church is called to be less like a committee and more like a family; less like an institution and more a community of mutual concern and common purpose; less a socio-economically homogeneous collection of the like-minded and more a crazy and beautiful kaleidoscope of interaction. The church is called to be a reflection to the world of the living, laughing, loving nature of God.

I said that we become like what we worship. Then by our worship we should strive to be a community of love that embraces and embodies differences and expresses itself in love for the world; growing not just individually but collectively; here not for what we can get out of it for ourselves but for who we can become together.

This is not a theological mind game. It is an invitation from Lady Wisdom, from God the Father/Mother, from Jesus the Christ and from the Holy Spirit to join the divine dance of true life; to be a participant in the community of God.

Amen

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