

Living in the Image of the Holy Trinity

Sermon: St. Peter's Cathedral, Helena, Montana - The Very Rev. Graham Smith, Interim Dean

Trinity Sunday" May 27, 2018

Good Morning! Thank you for being here on this our last Sunday after serving with you these past six months. I am pleased to tell you that today, you get to hear my last sermon!

I am reminded of the day I left my first parish in Cleveland, Ohio. Just before we were to begin our procession, one of my friends came up to me and he said, "the church is full. You can't even find a seat. Everyone has come to hear your last sermon. Do you see the parking lot out there? It's packed. You can't even find a place to park. You see that?" I said to him, "Yes, sir, I do." Then he said to me, "Well, it just goes to show you, the truth of the 'old adage', Give the people what they want, and they will come!"

This is 'Trinity Sunday' the one Sunday in the Church Year when the preacher gets to preach on the Holy Trinity. I used to cringe, the day before this Sunday when I had to write a sermon on The Holy Trinity. I am bit embarrassed to admit this, because after all, this is our God. Our God is a Trinity of persons united as One God. The truth is that I had a very limited understanding of the Holy Trinity for the first part of my priesthood, in part because of the way we were taught in seminary. For most clergy of my era, we were taught the Holy Trinity in the context of the formation of the Nicene Creed, the ancient creed of the church, which we will say immediately after this sermon. We were taught various heresies and why the wording of the Nicene Creed came to be in order to protect the church against a distorted understanding of both the unity and the diversity of our one God in Three Persons.

A way of summarizing this would be to say that we were taught to understand the Holy Trinity **DOCTRINALLY**. Understanding the Holy Trinity doctrinally is very important, but it can be dry and boring. It can become a numbers game of how you get from three to one or one to three. Another way to understand the Holy Trinity is **RELATIONALLY**. To understand the Holy Trinity relationally, means to understand the relationships among the persons of the Holy Trinity. Since we as

God's creatures are meant to live in the image of God, then we are to treat each other as the persons of the Holy Trinity treat each other. That is the subject of the rest of this sermon. I only began to appreciate this way of understanding the Holy Trinity later in my life when I went back to school to do a doctorate in the 1990's at Virginia Theological Seminary near Washington D.C. My parish was always telling me that I needed to go back to school, so I finally went!

Once I began to understand the Holy Trinity relationally, God became much more alive to me. The life of the three persons of the Holy Trinity could be described as fire and passion and love. The inner life of the Holy Trinity was so life giving that it flowed over on the world giving us fire and passion, love and life.

Let's take some time to understand what we can learn about our God from the relationships among the three persons of the Holy Trinity. One thing you can learn from the relationships among the persons of the Holy Trinity is something I have mentioned many times before and which I hope you will remember if you remember anything I have said to you. It is simply this. Life is Relationship. Life is about relationships. It is not about the accumulation of things or the pursuit of status. There is only abundant human life when there is relationship. This may seem so obvious that we can easily overlook this simple truth. Life is relationship. You cannot have life without being in relationship with God and with other people. Human life begins in relationship. Human life is raised in relationship. When we are formed in the womb we are in relationship with our mothers. That relationship with our mothers continues when we are born. We cannot live without being in relationship. If we are isolated or abandoned, we will die.

The Holy Trinity is three persons in relationship. Their relationship is so life-giving, so loving and so abundant that the life of God overflows to the world God created. We are called to live in the image of God. The relationships among the three persons of the Holy Trinity is the model of the way we should be in relationship not only with God but with one another. One of the lessons we can learn from living in the image of the Holy Trinity is that Life is Relationship.

A second lesson we can learn from the relationships among the persons of the Holy Trinity is that their inner life can be described as one of **'self-giving'**. Self-giving is the essence of the inner life of the Holy Trinity. What makes the lives of the persons of the Holy Trinity so abundant is that they give of themselves fully to

the other persons. The Father gives himself fully to the Son. In the epistle to the Colossians we read that “in Jesus, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Colossians 1:19). In the third chapter of John, we hear the familiar words, “God so loved the world that he **gave** his only begotten Son” (John 3:16). The Son gives all that he has for the forgiveness and life of the world. The Holy Spirit gives his life to glorify Jesus. Jesus says of the Holy Spirit, “when he comes, “He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

Self-giving is the main characteristic of the inner life of God. Self-giving is also central to our lives. We are most alive when we fully give of ourselves for the good of others. I learned this truth from my father-in-law, a story very appropriate for Memorial Day. He served in the Navy during the Second World War. When I first met him, I learned that when we had a conversation, it was not long before he talked about his life in the service. I began to ask myself why he could talk so easily about that early time in his life. I finally concluded that the reason was quite simple. When Sherry’s father served in the Navy during the Second world War, it was a time when he risked all he had in the service of his country. He was willing to risk his whole life for the freedom of future generations. He was willing to give himself fully in a cause far greater than himself so that future generations would have a life of freedom from tyranny. Self-giving, giving all that we have for the good of others, makes us fully alive.

A third characteristic of the Holy Trinity and living in the image of the Holy Trinity is compassion. God, the Holy Trinity had compassion on the world God made. God did not stay up in heaven aloof and indifferent to a suffering world. God did not ignore human suffering because he was too pure to mess himself up with a messed up world. He sent his Son to enter this world not only as a human being among human beings, but a servant to all human beings. Jesus came to show us how to live, to show us how to forgive and to give his whole life in sacrificial love to restore the world to the manufacturer’s instructions. The Holy Trinity is compassionate.

I finish with some words to you about your future as you welcome your new dean next week, Scott Anderson and his wife, Jane. I want to thank you for the privilege of being with you these past six months as your interim dean. You have been so kind to Sherry and to me, so generous and hospitable. This all came as a

big surprise, when my friend and your interim dean, Paul Bresnahan, needed to step aside. I have been so touched by how many people came to our Sunday night teachings and participated with such faithful questions.

This is a very healthy community that is about to open a new chapter in its life together with your new dean. You have a history of a very full and rich ministry under faithful, dedicated deans. Now you will have another dean. Borrowing from what I said about the Holy Trinity, let me finish by offering three words of encouragement.

First, stay in close relationship with one another. Worship here as often as you can. Make your worship here of the highest priority. If you do that, your lives will flourish because your relationships will flourish and this community will flourish.

Second, give yourselves to the vocations God has given you. You all have a vocation and your lives will flourish when you give of yourselves fully to the work God has called you to do and has given you the gifts to do. When we give of ourselves, we are the most fully alive.

Third, continue to grow in compassion toward each other, toward yourselves and toward those who are outside of this community. God is compassionate. He would want all of us to know we are forgiven and to forgive. God also wants us to extend God's love and compassion to a world beyond this community. It was the former Archbishop of Canterbury, William Temple, who famously said that the primary purpose of the church is to serve those who are not a part of it. There are at least two ways to serve those who are not a part of this church. One is to extend God's love to the poor, to the outcast and to those without a voice. The other is to bring people into this community and make them a part of it. Jesus' good news is for everybody. There are countless people within a few miles of this church who are waiting for an invitation from one of you to become a member of the Body of Christ. Our primary purpose is to serve those outside the church.

In our Monday morning Bible study, one of our members taught us a phrase he never forgot, from a wise woman he met during his ministry. She taught him to "Ride with Jesus." I pass that on to you. "Ride with Jesus." And if I may add to that on this Trinity Sunday, words which the Bishop of New York wrote in the Bible he gave me when I was ordained, "Go with God, and be guided by his Holy Spirit." Amen