

Sermon 6-7-20
Paul Purdue preaching

Today is Trinity Sunday, where we consider God in three persons. All week, I considered leaving this lectionary theme to address the newscycle. However, perhaps our understanding of God might guide our living with each other. If God exists in relationship, what does that mean for our relationships with each other?

Years ago, an elementary teacher called me in as a religious expert to explain the Trinity to his class. We labeled intersecting circles Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. As we cut out shamrocks a child asked, "What about 4 leaf clovers?" Rifting on doubt another asked, "What about pine trees with all those needles?" Unimpressed with my answers another child pressed, "How can one thing really be three different things?" Feeling I either bewildered or inspired, I shouted "field trip" and we hustled off to the kitchen. The church ice maker offered this wonderful light airy ice: Sonic ice. After giving each child a few ice cubes, I dumped several full scoops into a big skillet. I cranked up the commercial stove's gas burner. Ice became water. Water became steam. Steam hitting a glass plate became water. Put the droplets in the freezer and voila, sleety ice drops. The kids knew this transforming scientific drill but marveled at the everyday miracle of one substance, three expressions. Still, I'm unsure if my impromptu object lesson helped anyone grasp the majesty and mystery of the Holy Trinity.

Love best explains the Trinity. God is love. Love exists in relationship: Creator, Christ, and Spirit. The nature and character of God is relational. 1 John 4 tells us, "No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God remains in us and God's love is made perfect in us." We experience God in loving relationships. If you want to prove God exists, start loving people. The presence of God in us will grow "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" in us. (Galatians 5) The Fruits of the Spirit are relational. The presence of other people provides an arena for values like peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control.

A few weeks ago, I was checking out at Kroger, when this older unmasked person came too near my cart. I was at the other end of my cart, but considered yelling: "Back off-super spreader! He aimlessly began reading my NPR T-shirt aloud: "O-pinions are cheap" and laughed saying, "I thought it said onions are cheap." This was a human being, a child of God unmasked before me. The Gospels often say, "seeing the person...". I saw in him signs of illness, poverty and loneliness. We stood some 5 feet apart and conversed. When all my groceries lay on the automated belt he grabbed my cart's handle and steadied himself. I thought of my father whose poor health made every shopping cart a kind of walker. "No one has ever seen God. But If we love each other, God remains in us, God's love is made perfect in us."

The Bible is the story of God's relationship with us. An incarnational God created humanity in the image of God: "God created humanity in God's own image, in the divine image God created them, male and female God created them." God's image does not dwell in the male or female body parts, but in the wholeness of humanity. God's image dwells within the relationship: the sameness and the difference. We see God in the harmony of difference: *planting and harvest, sun and moon, butterflies and buffalos, male and female, straight and queer, extrovert and contemplative, Congolese and*

Kentuckian, rapper and bassoonist, Bible moth and prophet, scientist and poet, peace officer and protester, Thou and I. "No one has ever seen God. But If we love each other, God remains in us and God's love is made perfect in us." I wonder, if we must outside of ourselves to know God's love? Is compassion necessary to our seeing God?

God's image is not only stamped into each of us; the whole of Scripture tells us how God dwells within human beings. After the prophet Nathan exposes David's abuse, a heartsick King David pleads, "Create a clean heart in me, God; put a new, faithful spirit deep inside me! Don't throw me out of your presence; please don't take your Holy Spirit away from me." (Psalm 51) God is with us in the relational radical messiness of this life.

Romans 8 is a messy love letter, more a jumble of run-on sentences than a systematic theology. It speaks of the Trinity with messy interchangeable imprecision. "There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free... God has done what was impossible... by sending Christ in a human body... the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit intercedes for us through wordless groans...who can separate us from God? No, in all these (terrible) things (that are happening) we are more than conquerors through God who loves us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor devils, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord ." Paul uses Spirit, Christ, and God almost interchangeably. To make it messier, Paul says the entire Trinity resides inside human bodies like ours. Messily, mysteriously, mind boggling. God is relational and Incarnational.

Indeed, when God wanted to show us how to love, God did not send down some more rules, angels or prophets. God came and lived with us within the confines of time and geography. That was a risky and messy move, but keeping with "No one has ever seen God. But If we love each other, God remains in us, and God's love is made perfect in us." If God is relational, then when we confront problems in the world, why do we always want to reach for rules to fix people? God's plan to save the world was deeply relational. Let us look long enough to see the image of God in one another. Compassion may be necessary in order to do anything for God!

As I have watched the news, I keep thinking about Jesus, God's example of love. Before I go on, I want to name that the sins of my generation, my whiteness, and my privilege always skew my vision. I want to be very careful not to weaponize Jesus' loving example as a tool to tamp down protest, silence angry or anguished cries, or in some way uphold oppression. I am sure white folks must stop saying, "I am sympathetic but....," "I support the cause but condemn the....," or "everyone just needs to .." Those arguments are not empathetic statements, more likely words seeking to protect our place, and they do harm by dismissing the oppressed person's grievances. The perfect example of God's love comes to us not as a creed or series of rules but in a person: Jesus Christ. . How can we love our neighbors if we forget the image of God dwells within each of us? Dr. King said, "A nation that will keep people in slavery for 244 years will thingify them-make them things. Therefore, they will exploit them, and poor people in general, economically." (Where Do We Go from Here) We must stop seeing

people as objects. Christ followers see people as beloved and made in the image of God.

I keep thinking about Jesus, police brutality, and the protests. Do you remember how Jesus flipped over tables and scattered the coins of the money changers? Was that just symbolic or actual property damage? Do we dig deep enough to realize Jesus addressed systemic injustice and economic exploitation? Jesus shut down the temple market. Mark 11 tells us Jesus would let no one pass through the temple. John 2:15 tells us that Jesus made a whip by binding some twine together and “chased them all out of the temple”, even the cattle and sheep. Jesus’ protest chant called for opening the temple to every person and nation. “No one has ever seen God. But If we love each other, God remains in us, and God’s love is made perfect in us.” Within a week of the protest, Jesus was crucified.

And I have been thinking about Jesus’ crucifixion. If we gaze at Jesus’ cross long enough, it will shake us. The crucifix (resisted by protestants) lifts before us Jesus’ unjust murder by entrenched systemic evil. In Matthew 23, Jesus angrily calls out the pattern of killing the prophets, saying the names from A-to-Z: “Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.” (Matthew 23) Preaching like that will get you killed. Religious leaders conspired with politicians to protect their respective empires. If we look at the cross long enough, we will see George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Trayvon Martin. and Martin Luther King in the face of Jesus. Sadly, if we check the four Gospel reports we will see police brutalize and taunt Jesus. They go well beyond Pilot’s sentence, inflicting troubling personalized violence. And yet, as Jesus breathed his last, Luke reports that a Roman soldier turns to Christ with compassion and offers loud, perhaps woe-filled praise for the witness of Love crucified.

We are so binary in our thinking. We love to grab our law and order and say it is “this” or “that”. However, God is relational. Last fall, I watched a viral video of young men displaying what at best was ignorant accidental white supremacy. I was furious. As the camera panned the crowd, I felt almost physically ill, when I saw what looked like a familiar face of a young person from a former church. I slowed down the video, frame by frame, texted the potential parents and was relieved to discover the offending party was not anyone I knew. It was crazy how fast my anger and judgment flipped to grief and heartache upon the possibility of seeing someone I loved in the offenders face. Somehow Jesus loved even the soldiers,preachers and governors who crucified him. Compassion transforms. So even on the cross, somehow, the soldier saw the compassion of Christ. The offense and ugly inhumanity of the cross remain, but compassion sees the image of God even in the faces of enemies. “No one has ever seen God. But If we love each other, God remains in us, and God’s love is made perfect in us.”

So on this Trinity Sunday, amid the Corona virus, repulsed by police brutality, fearful, angry, one fourth of us without work or furloughed, trying to more deeply understand long standing oppression, divided by leaders, and assailed with conflicting reports we may need Trinity Sunday more than more rules. Let us remember God is relational. Compassion is essential to knowing God. “No one has ever seen God. But If we love each other, God remains in us, and God’s love is made perfect in us.” Maybe we will only see God, when we see the image of God in others?.

I do not know entirely what to do. Do we flip over tables with Jesus? Do I preach a stem-winder from Matthew 23. Trust me, Jesus blisters the church and government leaders before weeping over the city. Surely, we must stop defending systems that explain away all these dead black brothers. I do not know the final plan, but I know it must be rooted in compassion. Compassion sees the image of God in all people. Perhaps, when we deeply love and serve those: who suffer, who protest, who riot, who weep for justice, who are hungry, who thirst for equality, who are imprisoned and who are oppressed we will finally see the face of Jesus. (Matthew 25)

“No one has ever seen God. But If we love each other, God remains in us, and does a work of perfecting within us.” May God, whose nature is relationship, guide our living with each other. May we see the face of Jesus all around us. Amen.