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Trinity Sunday

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph S. Pagano on

The First Sunday After Pentecost: Trinity Sunday, June 19, 2011

Well friends, today is Trinity Sunday, the day in the Church year when we ponder the mystery of the Triune God, how God is Three in One and One in Three. It is also the day when, throughout the world, rectors usually decide that it is a good Sunday for their assistant to preach. Now, I don't want to say anything about our rector ... you all know I love our rector ... but since I've been at St. Anne's she has decided ... prayerfully discerned ... that it would be good for me to preach on these Sundays: You know the story where Jesus says if you don't hate your father and your mother you can't be my disciple? ... that was apparently a good Sunday for the assistant to preach. You know the story where Jesus praises the shady dealings of the Dishonest Manager ... that was also a good Sunday for me to preach. And you know the story where John the Baptist calls all the people who came out to be baptized a brood of vipers ... again that was apparently a good Sunday for the assistant to preach. I'm not making this up. Have you noticed a pattern? I'm just saying, the next time there is some puzzling or challenging topic on the church calendar, I look forward to seeing you all.

So today is Trinity Sunday and sure enough yours truly is on the rota. But here's the thing. I actually like preaching on Trinity Sunday. I like it because some of the most exciting and creative theology being done today is about the Trinity: about how the Trinity helps us to understand ourselves, our place in the world, and our relationship to God. I don't know if I would call this a best-kept secret, but it does sometimes surprise people to find out how much the Trinity influences Christian thought today. And because this is an area of research that is rapidly expanding, I can only focus on one major insight today. There is a lot more to be said, but there will be other Trinity Sundays and I kind of think I will be on the rota again next year.

So the major point about the Trinity I want to lift up this morning is this: God is social and so are we. Martin Luther once said, "God is nothing but burning love and a glowing oven full of love."¹ And if God is love, then God cannot exist in isolation. Think about it. To love is

¹ Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luther's Werke* (Weimar: H. Boehlau, 1883-) 36, 425.

to be in relationship, and to love perfectly is to be in eternal relationship. If God is perfect love, then God must be social. God is not some simple, solitary, isolated, individual being. God is not some kind of Wizard of Oz character hiding out behind the curtain of the stars. God is not personal in that sense. That's anthropomorphic. Rather, God is personal in the sense that God is the love that creates, redeems, and sustains everything that exists. The life of God is like a divine dance of persons in love from which sparks fly, the love that moves the sun and the other stars. At the heart of the universe is the divine dance of persons in love, and if God is the love that creates and reconciles and transforms all that exists, then God must be relational in God's essence. So when we say that God is Trinity, it is a way of saying that God is love, nothing but burning love and a glowing oven full of love, a love that over-flows into all of creation.

Now, if God is social, then we are social too. If we are created in the image and likeness of the Triune God, then we are also created to be in loving relationships. Now, this is actually quite a radical statement because it runs counter to the pervasive individualism of our culture. I don't know if we are still living in the "Me Generation," but many folks, philosophers and theologians, have noted that the rampant individualism of our society is one of the greatest problems facing us today. Mark Toulouse writes, "personal success and consumption have become the primary ends of American life. Even religion has become a competitive item for sale. As Carlyle Marney used to say Americans are addicted to salvation by succeeding. This statement might today be altered to include salvation by consuming. The pursuit of private gain has become the great American sport in all walks of life."²

And this is bad. It is bad not only for society, but it is also bad for people themselves. The loneliness and isolation and despair that are so prevalent in our society stems from this view of people as isolated, individual selves. But the doctrine of the Trinity tells a different story. It tells us that we are created for loving relationships. We are hard-wired for relationships of mutual fellowship and love. Did you know that many scientists are also saying that we are hardwired for social connections? Last year I came across an article on trust in the Harvard Business Review of all places in which the author writes, "Within one hour of birth, a human infant will draw her head back to look into the eyes and face of the person gazing at her. Within a few more hours, the infant will orient her head in the direction of her mother's voice. And, unbelievable as it may seem, it's only a matter of hours before the infant can actually mimic a caretaker's expressions. A baby's mother, in turn, responds and mimics her child's expressions and emotions within seconds. In short, we're social beings from the get-go: We're born to be engaged and to engage others."³

Now this is really amazing, but it really ought not to be all that surprising if God is love. The Triune God is nothing but burning love and a glowing oven full of love. That love has created us and redeemed us and sustains us. Our life, our breath, our very existence is a gift. When we enter into loving relationships we not only find our truest and deepest selves, but we also find God, because we are created in the image of the Triune God. God is social, and so are

² Mark Toulouse, *God in Public: Four Ways American Christianity and Public Life Relate* (Presbyterian Pub. Corp, 2006), p. 41.

³ Roderick Kramer, "Rethinking Trust," *HBR* (June, 2009)

we. The divine life is a dance party. When we join the party, when we enter into loving relationships, then we participate in the very life of the Triune God, in whom we live and move and have our being. We are created to participate in God's love and we are created to share that love with others. Here's how Miroslav Volf puts it: "The flow of gifts is God's arms opened to the world, enabling us to partake of the gift exchange that makes up eternal divine life and supreme bliss . . . The purpose of the outbound flow of God's gifts is for us to receive living water from God's eternal source, and to thereby come to mirror among ourselves the loving gift exchange of [God]."⁴ If God is love, then the purpose of human life is to participate in that love, and to share that love with others. I suppose that is why when Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment he said "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." It seems to me that this is the key to the universe. God is love. Participate in that love. Share that love.

So God is social and so are we. God is nothing but burning love and a glowing oven full of love, and we are created to participate in that love and to share that love. These insights that come from thinking about the Trinity could really transform how we think about God and ourselves and our place in the world. When I was teaching fulltime, I remember many conversations with students who would say things like "Dr. Pagano, I just can't believe in a God who sits up there in heaven and allows all the terrible things that happen in the world." And my usual response is to say, "Well, neither do I." This usually surprises them. They seem to think that as a theologian and a priest I am somehow contractually obligated to defend God at all times. But, quite frankly, their view of God as some kind of aloof, Wizard of Oz character hanging out alone behind the curtain of the stars is not worth defending. More importantly it is not the God we know who poured himself out completely for us on the cross of Jesus Christ. The Trinity is a way of saying that that costly love, that vulnerable love, that suffering love that we know in Christ, that love which continues in the new life given to us in the Spirit is who God most truly, most fully is. God is Emmanuel, God with us and for us, who suffers with us and for us, not hanging out in some far corner of the universe watching all the pain and sorrow of the world but rather hanging on the cross for us and for our salvation.

The Trinity, at its heart, is a way of pointing to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the new life that comes from this, and saying that is what God is most truly like. The love that moves the sun and the other stars is the same love that poured itself out for in the self-giving love of Jesus. God is nothing but burning love and a glowing oven full of love. And if we are created in the image and likeness of God, then we are to find our true selves not in being aloof and alone and apart and above it all, but rather in giving of ourselves away in love, in our vulnerable and suffering hearts, and in all those ways we are with and for one another.

God is social and so are we.

God is nothing but burning love and a glowing oven full of love.

We are created to participate in and share that love.

Amen.

⁴ Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), p. 70.