

Sunday, June 12, 2022

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON
Divine Alchemy
Trinity Sunday

INTRODUCTION

Last week we remembered the birth of what we think of as church. Shortly after Jesus ascended into heaven, the Holy Spirit, that he promised would come, was poured out into the hearts and minds of widely diverse and divided people. The Holy Spirit is that original spark of life that resides deep inside every living thing. Somehow on that particular day, the spark ignited a spiritual inferno that consumed every one of the 120 men and women who had gathered in the upper room (Acts 1:14-15).

Before this outpouring they were seriously divided, segregated by the same things that still divide us today. Race, regional dialects, entrenched customs, misunderstandings, cultural differences, and social/economic status. Suddenly, when the Holy Spirit descended, all these heavily fortified, stone walls of separation were utterly leveled. They began to speak and understand one another's language. To a person, they were all transformed from the protective mindset of narrow exclusivity and exceptionalism, to a wide and sweeping acceptance of the other as equal, as honorable and even entirely vital. The uniting richness of God's kinship manifest among them was joyous, liberating and all encompassing. Can you imagine? Instead blaming, shaming, attacking and positioning for advantage, there was unity, honor and respect! Their diversity became their strength, and it shook the world!

So today, and the rest of the month, I want to take a deeper dive into the Holy Spirit and how our trinitarian model of understanding God can have a huge impact on how we relate to one another. Let's begin with what Jesus had to say about the Holy Spirit and then how Paul understood the power and significance of the trinity.

Toward the end of the Gospel of John, Jesus offers the disciples his final teaching. His words have a sense of urgency. It's as if he is desperate to get across the fullness of eternal truth in one evening session. For 3 dense chapters, (John 15-17) Jesus summarizes the deepest truth about the nature of God the Father, Jesus the Son and the Holy Spirit. Today I'll read just a portion from the middle of his teaching. Notice the relational quality between the Spirit, Jesus and the one whom Jesus called, "Father."

This is the Gospel of John chapter 16 verses 12 through 15.

SCRIPTURE John 16:12-15

“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

The word of God for the people of God.

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**PRAYER**

*God of all Spirit, POWER and wisdom, as you have breathed into us the Spirit and given us life, we ask you to dwell among us now. May your presence connect us together with grace, understanding and eternal wisdom. Fill us with the courage to truly live, breath and move each day in the fullness of the Holy Spirit. - AMEN*

**SERMON**

Back in in the day when I was forced to attend Catholic confirmation class, the instructor, Sister Mary Margaret, would stand before us, dressed in the full nun attire complete with the head gear known as “a habit.” Clearly, I’m in no position to judge now, but at the time, that stern uniform was the perfect wardrobe for an even sterner woman. The day came when she was going to teach us about the Holy Trinity, God the Father, Jesus the Son and the Holy Ghost. (The far creepy name for the Holy Spirit.) As always, I immediately went to that happy place in my brain that resembled what doctors call a “petit mal seizure.” Symptoms include staring into space with a blank look and all activity stops. I wasn’t seizing, this was a self-imposed state of hypnosis. My friend Jim, however, navigated the boredom in the opposite way. He used to love antagonizing Sister Mary Margaret with endless questions. On the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, Jim blurted out, “That makes no sense at all! How can there be 3 in 1? The math doesn’t add up.” Sister Mary Margaret slowly walked uncomfortably close to his seat and menacingly stared down at him. “Faith never adds up, James, that’s why they call it faith! It’s a mystery and God demands that we take it on faith! End of story young man.” Ahh yes, religious training in my wonder years.

Imagine my surprise when years later I discovered that this trinitarian mystery was not at all the end of a debate but rather a curious enigma that invites more thought and more debate. If, in fact, God does exist as three in one, then that means that God's very self - God's very being - exists and can only be identified as a relational being. It's like our baptismal font. One jar fills up with clear, pure holy water only to pour out into the other jar that receives, only to empty out again into the other. Over and over it goes. This is a model of the Divine Alchemy; the 3 become one, fully receiving and emptying out to the other. This is the perpetual motion of loving relationship. One cannot exist apart from the other. Could it be that our hard-wired need for community and social acceptance is centered in that idea? If we truly are made in the image of a relational God - a God in three persons - a God that can only exist in relationship with the other, then we desperately need to allow the Holy Spirit of the Living God to nurture in us, authentic, non-judgmental, grace filled relationships. In order to thrive as individuals and well-functioning communities, we need the Holy Spirit. Come Holy Spirit, come. Clearly human beings cannot do this on our own.

At this point in history, it seems to me that we need to urgently study this Divine alchemy of God in 3 persons and find ways to reflect it in our lives together. The trinitarian God is a model that teaches us the primary importance of true connection with one another. The trinity reinforces the idea that we are inextricably connected to one another.

Psychology tells us that every human being has a deep-seated need to be truly accepted as we truly are. Sadly enough, sociologists tell us that access to this kind of unconditional relationship is becoming more and more rare. In fact, rippling out of the COVID19 pandemic is a second pandemic called loneliness. Loneliness afflicts millions of people from all walks of life. The affliction of loneliness is frequently invisible, hidden, and covered up. You may have hundreds of friends, yet still ache in the dead of night from the sting of loneliness, because you can't truly reveal your authentic, messy, imperfect self with even one of them. "If people knew who I really was, I'd be rejected, mocked and banned from the group. The only way I am accepted and fit in here is because I know how to behave correctly, I know how to look right, I know what opinions are safe to share. I know how to be elegantly, convincingly acceptable." Our primal desire to belong as a member of something bigger than ourselves, all too often, diminishes our ability to be transparently authentic. Our true values, world view, experience and genuine behaviors get locked up tight, disguised and hidden. But the inescapable truth of the matter is that you feel, deep in your gut, that you just don't belong.

Most of the time, you feel like you are a donkey in a pasture of wild horses. But we yearn so deeply to have real connection with others that we, ironically, compromise who we really are in order to belong. “If I pretend to be a wild horse, I’ll be accepted, worthy and part of this group.”

Sadly, most churches are not immune. In many churches there is a thick unspoken, yet ever-present, way to fit in, an acceptable way to think, an appearance to project, an agreeable opinion to hold, a particular theology to believe. This is not unity in the Spirit, this is a convincing veneer, a thin imposter covering over a toxic vapor. It only looks like Spirit. Even in churches, sometimes especially in churches, fitting in becomes more critically important than revealing our authentic selves. How can true connection, relationship, grace and love even get a foothold in such a poisonous atmosphere? It can’t! But the thought of exclusion from the tribe keeps us hostage from the true belonging that we are hard wired to be part of. Brené Brown writes that, “true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world, our sense of belonging, she writes, can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance.”

Self-acceptance is what the Spirit of God brings. Knowing that God loves us, accepts us and is with us exactly as we are, empowers us to fearlessly love and fully accept the other. This is the beginning of authentic relationship, authentic community, authentic church. The Holy Spirit of God validates you and also validates the other as valued, loved and accepted, even with all our flaws, warts, mismatch socks and limitations. We are not justified by our perfection, we are justified and unified by faith, grace, forgiveness and love. Here is how Paul put it in his letter to the Romans:

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Romans 5:1-5)

What Jesus promised came on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit enabled this radical self-acceptance and other-acceptance. God’s love was poured into their hearts through the Holy Spirit. Peace was achieved in unity with God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, and it opened a floodgate of cooperation,

collaboration and community across all of their constructed boundaries. Filled with the Spirit of God, people understand one another as both beautiful and broken, saintly yet prone to sin, beloved of God and also struggling to accept that love. The Spirit of God within us opens our eyes to see and accept fully our mutually perfect imperfection. Only then can grace thrive and grace breeds true love, and true love can only mean true belonging and the trinity is manifest among us, and church is born. Holy Spirit unity is gives us the strength and courage to stand proud as a donkey even when we feel that everyone around us is a wild horse. You belong, they belong and together we are one, just as the triune God is one. I honestly hope that Sister Mary Margaret knew that. I hope you know that too.

As astounding and colorful as the Pentecost story is in the Book of Acts, I want you all to know, it was not a one-time event. To be the Body of Christ, we must constantly be seeking the Holy Spirit's presence and work in our lives together. Unleashing the Holy Spirit is the way that God is actually present with us, between us and among us, everywhere and at all times. The Holy Spirit is God guiding us, giving us the courage to be real, and helping us to actually become the Body of Christ in the fullness and joy that we are created to be. The idea of our trinitarian God, continually pouring out to the other, only to be filled up again, is the Divine Alchemy that transforms and shapes our community, collaboration and cooperation. So, come Holy Spirit, come. Tear off any false veneer and burn away any toxicity among us. Guide us, shape us and make us one as you are one. Help us to know that we DO belong to you, to ourselves and to one another. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.