

“Tri-unity in Dis-unity”
Sunday, June 14, 2020
First Christian Church, Murray, KY
By Rev. Ruth Ragovin

A Celtic Trinitarian Night Shielding Prayer
Included in “Carmina Gadelica”



*“I lie down this night with God,
And God will lie down with me;
I lie down this night with Christ,
And Christ will lie down with me;
I lie down this night with the Spirit,
And the Spirit will lie down with me;
God and Christ and the Spirit
Be lying down with me.”*

Jesus’ Final Instructions to his Disciples in Matthew 28:18-20:

*¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the **Father** and of the **Son** and of the **Holy Spirit**, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*
(NRSV)

Paul’s Final Instructions to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 13:11-13:

*¹¹ Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. ¹² Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. ¹³ The grace of the **Lord Jesus Christ**, the love of **God**, and the communion of the **Holy Spirit** be with all of you. (NRSV)*

On occasion when our young people are going off to college or to work in another town, they have asked me what they should look for as they search for a new church. I emphasize two things: (1) find an open and affirming church that emphasizes the mercy and grace rather than the judgment of God and (2) find a church that keeps the Trinity in balance. We Christians worship a God who is our Father / Mother or Creator; Son or Redeemer; and Holy Spirit or Sustainer. One God in three persons. The mysterious doctrine of the Trinity reminds us that we don't worship a remote pie in the sky God who, like a clockmaker, wound up the world and then retreated and left us to our own devices (God help but that the batteries don't run out!), but our God is incarnational, personal, present to us and our world, and actually within us. The Trinity points to the relational and social quality of God, whose name is I AM or I AM BECOMING. God is a dynamic verb, in motion, dancing, swirling, flowing, like a triple water-wheel that continually refills and empties itself as it pours out its love and grace onto the universe and all of us into eternity.

Last Sunday was Trinity Sunday. Since I was away, I want to speak about the Trinity in my message instead today, while also being fully aware that today is Juneteenth Sunday, the day in our denomination's calendar when we celebrate the effective end of slavery in the United States that occurred in Texas on June 19, 1865. Yet, somehow, it seems appropriate to remember both Trinity Sunday and Juneteenth as I ask myself whether there are any teachings or perspectives that our Christian understanding of the Trinity can offer as our nation faces three simultaneous pandemics—the coronavirus pandemic, the economic pandemic, and the racial pandemic—all of which feed upon one another as they have raised our nation's anxiety to almost unbearable levels, leading people to take to the streets, including here in Murray, KY, both protesting and rioting, as we bear witness to the pain, anguish, and justified anger that has long been simmering just beneath the surface.

One of today's lectionary passages from 2 Corinthians 13:11-13 contains the final lines of Paul's correspondence with the Christians in Corinth. We know there were lots of disagreements, factions, infighting, finger pointing, and outright hatred among them. Some have said that conflict was the Corinthian's favorite sport! Sound familiar? Paul ends his letter by referring back to and summarizing all the advice he had given them about coming together in unity, seeking restoration and reconciliation, encouraging one another, being of one mind, living in peace. Even trying to greet one another with a 'holy kiss' (something not practical during these times of physical distancing, although some commentators have said we should understand the 'holy kiss' to mean we should get over

ourselves and kiss and make up!). And then Paul says farewell to them using what has become our traditional Trinitarian benediction with which we end our worship services to this day: ¹³ *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.*” Matthew ends his Gospel in chapter 28:18-20 with Jesus commissioning his disciples (and all of us) to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, imparting Jesus’ teachings, as we remember that our Triune God is with us to the end of the age.

This understanding of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is so foundational to our faith that a Sunday was designated in the tenth century called the ‘Feast of the Holy Trinity’. It is the only day of the church year when we celebrate a church doctrine rather than a teaching or event from the Bible. Trinity comes from the Latin *Trinitas*, which means “threeness.” The doctrine of the Trinity states that we worship one God who is also three-in-one. We experience and relate to God in three ways: God as Creator; God as Son; and God as Holy Spirit. They are all co-equal and eternally present with one another but there have been historical stages in God’s relationship with us. We experience God as one beyond us who created the universe, who then came to live with us in the form of God the Son, and whose spiritual presence within us is known as the Holy Spirit.

The early Christian letters and Gospels are full of this threefold pattern in talking about God. Our creeds are divided into statements about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Whole courses are taught in seminary about the Trinity. During worship we sing: *“Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen. Amen.”* In many Christian traditions people make the sign of the cross over their bodies, in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We end our worship services with the Trinitarian benediction in Paul’s final words to the Corinthians.

There could be a sermon series devoted to attempting to describe the Trinity but I want to move in a more practical direction. Our question for today is whether the doctrine of the Trinity can offer us any help in navigating the difficult circumstances we find ourselves in today, especially during the present racial pandemic as people have taken to the streets in the aftermath of the deaths of Breonna Taylor in KY and George Floyd in MN. And I believe the answer is yes, as we look at the purpose of each person of the Trinity.

The first person of the Trinity is God the Father / Mother / Creator of the universe. Our Bible begins by telling us that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and all that was in it, including human beings. Listen again with fresh ears and an open heart, as if for the first time, to what Genesis 1:27-28, 30-31 tells us about the creation of human beings:

²⁷ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. ²⁸ God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” ... ³⁰And it was so. ³¹God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. (NRSV)

Note that God did not create only some human beings but ALL human beings, both male and female, as being fully and perfectly in the image of God. God was very pleased with humankind and said that ALL of them were very good. God blessed ALL of them and gave ALL of them the human task of taking care over the earth and all its creatures. The Bible is very clear that our Creator God created everyone as equally valued, loved, and called to care for our planet. All human beings matter equally to God. All lives matter to God. So when some distort this Biblical teaching and treat other human beings as inferior, less than, not as deserving as, they are going against God’s creative purpose and intention for this world. In short, they are sinning.

The early Christians understood this, especially since many of them were marginalized and oppressed as they lived under the Roman imperial occupation. Some of Jesus’ followers were slaves. Jesus taught and modeled that the dividing walls between people needed to come down. Overcoming divisions and unity in Christ was perhaps the most important teaching and practice of the early church, as we can see from Paul’s final words to the Corinthians in our passage today. In another letter to the Galatians (3:28) Paul summarizes God’s creative intention for this world, writing that the world’s three most divisive barriers of race, class, and gender needed to be dismantled: *²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.* (NRSV)

Juneteenth celebrates the overcoming of the sin of slavery, when one group of people subjected another group of people for their own end and profit. Yet, we know that even though slavery might have ended on paper or through a decree, its sins have continued on in ways that are very visible to and experienced daily by our black sisters and brothers

but may be invisible to us white people. We may think that we have hit a triple that has landed us on third base, but actually we were born there. That's what white privilege is about. But there are other times when the acts of racial bias and hatred are so obvious and ugly that we are shaken out of complacency and begin to see more clearly. Like when our Black brothers and sisters are murdered on the streets of our country or even in their own homes when they sleep. So there are shouts everywhere that "Black Lives Matter!" Black lives matter to our Creator God, who created them in God's image!

And now for a little pastoral teaching moment that is addressed to my white brothers and sisters in Christ, some of whom may have had their buttons pushed and become reactive when people shout out or hold up signs that say "Black Lives Matter!" and want to respond or actually do respond by saying or posting on social media that "All Lives Matter!". Yes, of course, all lives matter. That is precisely the wisdom we gain when we look at the Creation Story in Genesis in relation to the first person of the Trinity, God our Father / Mother. But please understand when people say that "Black Lives Matter" they are not saying that some lives matter more than other lives. They are saying that their lives have been devalued for far too long and that their lives matter too.

I want to try to explain why it is hurtful to respond to the statement "Black Lives Matter" by saying "All Lives Matter." An analogy might be that if a house is burning down you don't go up to the person whose house is burning and say "All houses matter." You work to put out the fire in the house that is burning. When someone has been diagnosed with cancer you don't say there are other diseases too. When you go to the doctor and you have a sore throat you don't expect the doctor to say "your whole body matters." You expect them to look at the part of your body that is hurting you. A New Testament analogy. When one sheep got lost, didn't Jesus leave the other 99 sheep to go and find the one that was lost and hurting? He focused on the one in need, but that didn't mean that he didn't care about and love the other 99 sheep just as much. When one group of people is mourning the tragic deaths of members of their community and they say "Black Lives Matter" it is so uncaring to respond by saying "All Lives Matter" because it indicates to them that you have not taken the time or effort to try and understand their situation and that you do not share their pain, even though we are called to be one body in Christ.

So please, my white brothers and sisters in Christ, tread carefully and lightly. Listen deeply with fresh ears and an open heart. Our nation is so fragile right now. Pour out the love of our Creator God upon our community! Enact in word and deed what is said in our Trinitarian benediction: May the love of God be with you! Be lavish in your love! That is what we are baptized into and that is what we are called to bring to the world!

Let us take that Trinitarian wisdom and power of love of the first person of the Trinity with us into this difficult and painful moment in our nation's history as we boldly state that every single person is made in the perfect image of God.

“Now may the love of God be with you, and the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ ...” Our Lord Jesus Christ, the bearer of radical grace, is the second person of the Trinity. What wisdom does Jesus bring to this critical moment in our nation? Volumes could be said about this but just as we understood the first person of the Trinity, our Creator God, by looking at God's first act in creating the universe and us, let's see what Jesus' first act was when he began his ministry. After Jesus was baptized, and spent 40 days preparing himself in the wilderness through prayer and fasting, he traveled to his hometown synagogue in Nazareth where, on the sabbath day, he announced the purpose of his public ministry by intentionally choosing to read from the prophet Isaiah. Jesus stood, unrolled the scroll to the place he was looking for, and said to his family and all who had watched him grow up that:

*¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free.”* (Luke 4:18, NRSV)

And that is exactly what Jesus did as, for the next three years, he traveled and brought the liberating news of the Gospel to the poor, the captives, the disadvantaged, women, widows, orphans, foreigners, children, the estranged, those with physical and mental ailments, those considered impure, despised tax collectors, those considered second class citizens, religious authorities, the outcast, the oppressed, and he set them free through his radical grace. He acted too, knowing there can be no freedom without justice! He challenged sinful behavior, both personal and societal. We remember how Jesus confronted systems of injustice when he protested about the Temple-State's exploitation of the poor. Indeed, it was his speaking out for justice that angered those in authority, resulting in his public lynching on a cross beside criminals.

Just as Jesus, the second person in the Trinity, challenged unjust religious and secular systems, we too are called to find ways to work in solidarity with any group of people who are targeted by unjust systems, to stand intentionally against racial inequality, as we

seek to do our part to end systems of oppression and privilege. Just as Jesus extended grace to us, we are called to extend that grace to others.

“Now may the love of God, and the grace of our Lord Jesus, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you ...” The third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, provides the power that we can draw upon to change our hearts so that we can see others as God sees them, and work toward communion or the union of all that which is broken in our world. The love of God, the grace of Jesus, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. It is the power of Tri-unity that enables us to build comm-unity during times of dis-unity.

Yes, I know, that feels pretty overwhelming right now. We all have tri-fold pandemic fatigue. But, remember, we don't have to do this all on our own! We have been promised the power that comes from the Holy Spirit! But can we really trust that the power to work toward communion will actually be given to us? I'm encouraged so often by the early Celtic Christians who truly believed that, during times of hardship and danger, they could call upon the Trinity to give them power! Some of you may remember the remarkable story of our fifth-century brother Saint Patrick, who was traveling with some fellow evangelists through a dangerous section of Ireland and were worried for their very lives. Patrick called upon the power of the Trinity to keep them safe, intoning in what we have termed “Saint Patrick’s Breastplate” or “The Deer’s Cry”:

*I summon today
All these powers between me and those evils,
Against every cruel and merciless power
that may oppose my body and soul ...*

*I arise today
Through a mighty strength, the invocation of the Trinity,
Through belief in the Threeness,
Through confession of the Oneness
of the Creator of creation.*

And while he was intoning this prayer he and his group shape-shifted into deer and darted off into the woods, averting danger.

Today, let's reclaim the love of God, and the grace of Jesus, and the communion of the Holy Spirit to see us through this difficult time in the life of our nation and our world, remembering that we have been baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And that makes us a powerful force to be reckoned with!

Now, in your homes (or wherever you might be), I would like you to envision our troubled nation, hold all its hurting people in your heart, as you raise your hand, and repeat the following blessing over our world.

Now may the love of God

And the grace of Jesus

And the fellowship of the Holy Spirit

Be with you all.

Amen!