

All Together

David A. Baer

*Trinity Sunday (C)
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Text: John 16:12-15

There are some friends you have to set aside a whole day for. Do you have friends like this? I remember one day I drove to meet up with a friend I hadn't seen in a while, and we were supposed to meet up for lunch. And by the time we had finished, I had to call my wife and tell her I was going to be an hour late for dinner. Because there are some friendships where you just feel so connected, so in tune with the other person that it's as if the two of you enter into this space-time bubble, where time and your surroundings fall away. And it doesn't matter whether you've seen this friend last week, or five years ago—there's a correspondence between your values and sense of humor and the way you use language that just allows you to pick up wherever you left off. Have you had friends like that?

Today is Trinity Sunday, which is kind of odd. We don't have a whole lot of Sundays named after doctrines of the church. We don't call Christmas Incarnation Day. We Presbyterians don't have a Predestination Day. Mostly we mark the passage of time through the year with the stories of Jesus and the disciples. But this Sunday is an exception. And it's an intimidating one, too. Men and women have been put to death over disagreements about the relationship between the Three Persons of the Trinity. Nicholas, the Bishop of Myra in the fourth century, later became St. Nicholas, Santa Claus. But in history, as opposed to Coca Cola ads, he's known for walking up to a priest named Arius at a church council and slapping him across the face, all because Arius claimed that Jesus, the Son of God, was of a *similar* substance, but not the *same* substance, as God the Father. It's easy for us to roll our eyes... Why in the world would grown adults brawl and even kill one another over these abstract ideas? Maybe they had pent up aggression and a need to win that in our own time they could have more profitably expended in sports. But that makes it all the more puzzling that, as a church, we feel it's important enough to spend a Sunday every year remembering that we worship a God whom we know as Three in One and One in Three.

It helps me, though, to remember that the Bible tells us we're made in the image of God. There's an imprint of God's own being, a stamp of God's character and nature, that's left on us from our earliest beginnings as a people. And so when we talk about who God is, we're also talking about who we are, or at least who we're meant to be. It matters that God is not a solitary white-haired old man living in the sky all alone. It matters that when we, as Christians, talk about God, we always imagine God as a community of Persons united in love, distinct in their identity but one in purpose and intention. Because if that is who God is, and if that is the image we're made in, then when Jesus tells us that the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves, he's just reminding us of the character that's imprinted on our souls from the very beginning. We are not made, first and foremost, to self-actualize, to achieve, to get our own way. We are made, first and foremost, to love, and to unite with others in common purpose without losing who we

are.

The Bible doesn't help us much with the Trinity, though. You won't find the word in any verse of scripture. The apostle Paul, who loves nothing more than to chase down a good, strong idea about the purpose of Jesus, or the nature of Christian community, says nothing about the Trinity. Instead you get these little hints scattered here and there through the scriptures, which the church later gathered up, like the pieces of mosaic, and found that this piece fit well here, that one there, until a picture emerged of the Triune God.

One of those pieces is our reading today from the book of Proverbs. In this text, we hear a feminine voice lifted up in the personification of Wisdom. Lady Wisdom claims that she was brought forth before anything was created, and that she was present with God at the creation of everything, assisting God, "like a master worker," she says. What's more, God and Lady Wisdom took *delight* in their shared work, and in one another. What an amazing collaboration that must have been, like the time we spend connecting with an old friend. God does not want to work alone or act alone or be alone, and so from the very beginning, there is a partner, a co-laborer, a friend, not existing apart from God, but within the Godhead itself.

In the New Testament, the gospel of John tells this same story in a different way: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (John 1:1-3a) Whether you talk about Word or Wisdom as God's partner in creation, the role is the same, and so is the relationship. Both flow forth from God. Both work together with God. Both stand with God, united in love.

For Christians, as we think about how God moves and acts through the whole sacred story we tell, we see one God revealed as three Persons. Traditionally, we've called them Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But there are other words that can be helpful too. When we remember that the scriptures also tells God is love, that love is God's essence and being and nature, it leads to a mystery. How can there be love, unless there is someone who loves and someone who *is* loved? Was it true to say, "God is love," even before God had made anything, even before there was anything apart from God that could receive God's love? If not, then it's only true that God is love *now*, because of the circumstances, because there is a creation for God to love. But what if God *is* love, not just now, but forever and always and at the very heart? What if, contained within God's very self, there is a Lover and a Beloved, and a Love-that-Joins? What if God's love for us isn't something new or foreign to God's nature, but simply God stretching wider to encompass us with the love that already exists within God's own self?

You hear this movement in the gospel lesson for this morning, as Jesus tells the disciples that the Spirit of Truth will share with the disciples the things that belong to Jesus, and that the things that belong to Jesus are, in fact, the things that belong to the Father. God embraces God embraces God embraces us.

If the center of God's very being isn't power or will or self-sufficiency, if the essence of God's very being is a loving community, and if we're made in the image of this three-personed God, then we become more fully human as our relationships deepen, as we learn how to give ourselves to one another, and to move together with the same loving unity that rests at God's heart.

And from time to time, God lets us glimpse it for ourselves. During my junior and senior years of college I lived in a house that was set up as an intentional Christian community with four other students. We were still typical college students, though, caught up in our own studies and plans, absentmindedly neglecting our household

chores, getting angry at others absentmindedly neglecting their household chores, bumping and bruising one another in the way that people who live together often do. We used to share a meal every Saturday evening, and around the table we would talk about our life as a community. One night during dinner there was a call for our housemate. We let it go to the answering machine, as we always did at dinner time, and so all of us could hear the beginning of the message, before our housemate at last was compelled to pick up the phone. His father had had a heart attack and was being rushed to the hospital. I'll save you the suspense and tell you that he made a full recovery, but in that moment none of us knew that. All our individual complaints and desires fell away—whatever plans we had for Saturday night on hold for the moment—and we stood in a circle, our arms around each other's shoulders, and we prayed for our roommate and his dad. And when I think back on that night, I think—that's what it means to be church. No, it's more than that—that's what it means to be *human*, because that's what the image of God looks like, the image of God that each of us carries.

And church, at its best, helps us to be shaped into authentic human beings. It's why we share joys and concerns here in worship. We don't share joys and concerns just to recite what's happening to us and others we care about. It's not some kind of personal journalism happening here. When we share the things that matter to us and ask each other's prayers, it makes us vulnerable, it chips away at any false sense of self-sufficiency we might have and reinforces our sense of dependence on one another. It helps us to become more genuinely human, because we're expressing more clearly the image of God—not a lonely, self-sufficient God, but a Three-Personed God who exists in love and communion. Like God, we're not alone—we're in this together. Like God, it takes all of us to hold one another up.

Jesus says that the Spirit will take all that is his and declare it to us. And what is his, from before the world began, is love and community with the Spirit and with the one he called Abba. What is his is, what he offers to us, is genuine human personhood, a fulfillment of what we were created to be, in community with one another and with God. So may you embrace this gift—and when I say you, I mean “y'all,” because this gift by its very nature can only be received by a community! May we, all of us together, be shaped into a living image of the Triune God. Amen.