

Sermon on Trinity Sunday Church of the Ascension, Chicago, IL, June 16, 2019, Rev. Dr. Robert Petite D.Min., BCC, LMFT, ACPE, FSJ

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." 2 Corinthians 13:14

I have spent much of my ministry training hospital chaplains.

One aspect of that training involves encouraging students to grow in the use of their emotional selves, as a means of entering into a pastoral relationship with patients who are suffering emotional and physical distress.

These students seek to bring their whole selves, their minds and hearts to the bedside of patients, as a way to both effectively *understand* and to *emotionally* connect with patients. The learning goal is to increase the student's *Emotional Intelligence* as a means of fostering a deeply human and spiritual connection. *Emotional Intelligence* is the capacity to forge deep emotional and empathic connections with others.

I'm fond of the juxtaposition of those two words - emotional and intelligence. They are rarely spoken of together. Yet, if we are to realize our God given calling for human connection, I maintain that the capacity to forge deep emotional and empathic connections is extremely important.

On this Trinity Sunday, we will of course be aware of the great intellectual tradition that informs the celebration of this feast, and about which many books have been written. But what about highlighting the relational significance of the Trinity that is at the heart of many of these treatises. What about a celebration of the Trinity as the felt revelation of God's love for humanity. The Trinity is all about connections, relationships, that of the God the Creator, Redeemer, and Spirit, and of God's three-person relationship with us.

If we seek to enter more deeply into the relational nature of the Trinity, through our hearts as well as with our minds, we will discover that the Trinity speaks to us first through our imaginations, the seat of our emotions, and only secondarily to the exercise of our reason. Our imaginations enable us to feel our way into the story of God, the story of Jesus, our own stories, and the stories of our neighbors. These stories come together at this Eucharist as we become embodied participants in the Divine Life, and through our eating and drinking, carry the divine circulating love of the Trinity into a suffering world.

One of the ways in which we are already using our emotional intelligence as a means to connect to the story of God is to reflect on the way we use our intellectual and emotional capacities when we listen to the music offered at our liturgy. On the one hand our listening involves the use of our intellect as we seek to appreciate the order and structure of the music. On the other, listening to the music also involves the use of our affective faculties, as we FEEL our way into the emotional significance of the music. The combined use of our intellect and our emotions in this way creates empathy for the music, causing the music to touch us deeply.

Our Trinitarian God is the melody that is celebrated in the three-part harmony. To experience the exhilarating feeling that comes over us when we not only hear but feel that harmony within the melody, is but a small hint of what it might feel like to experience the one love of our three-person God. Our Liturgy is one of the ways we seek to experience that love close up.

We are meant to experience that love close up in our relationships with one another. The Trinity is the proclamation that our God is love itself. A solitary god cannot be love since love always requires an object, someone to love. Love, real love requires relationship. And so our God, the Trinity is a loving relationship circulating between the Creator, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and we were created as participants in that loving relationship. Without that love we would not exist.

There is in all of us a primordial DESIRE, a yearning and longing for connection, for home, an experience that reaches into the very depths of our humanity. Christian teaching proclaims that this yearning originates in the life of the Trinity, of God's own three-person loving relationship, calling us into God's life. That DESIRE in our hearts is God reaching out and inviting us into a fulfillment of the deepest longings of the human heart.

Batter my heart, three-person'd God;

Says John Donne, that extraordinary Anglican poet.^[1]

*for you / As yet but knock; breathe, shine, and seek to mend; / That I may rise, and stand,
o'erthrow me, and bend / Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.*

Take me to you, imprison me, for I, / Except you enthrall me, never shall be free, . . .
(*Holy Sonnet XIV; John Donne*)

That poem is an extraordinary expression of the Christian desire for God who is love itself.

We have all sat through explanations of the Trinity that can sound like mumbo jumbo, an illogical math where three adds up to one. An example of such an attempt is this delightful ancient Irish Poem.

*Three folds of the cloth, yet only one napkin is there, / Three joints in the finger, but still only one
finger fair, / Three leaves of the shamrock, yet no more than one shamrock to wear, / Frost,
snowflakes and ice, all in water their origin share, . . .*

These metaphors lack dynamism, they lack energy, and emotional and intellectual conviction. Where is the living, breathing, loving relationship at the heart of the Trinity in these metaphors?

Much better that we think of the Trinity as the melody that is celebrated in the three-part harmony.

Or this metaphor from the ancient Greek Fathers depicting the Trinity as a Round Dance: “*a dance that has continued for six thousand years, and six times six thousand, and beyond time when humans first knew time. An infinite current of love that streams without ceasing, to and*

fro, to and fro, to and fro, gliding from the Creator [Father] to the Son, and back to the Creator [Father], in one timeless happening”. (Elias Marechal, Tears of an Innocent God)

The Trinity is a proclamation that our God is not some distant, uninterested and unknowable, divine being, removed from human experience, but the realization of God’s loving meaning and action in our lives. We are invited, through the revelation of the Trinity, to know, feel, and believe in our hearts and minds, that we can touch God, in the person of Jesus, and feel God’s love through God’s Spirit, who is closer to us than our own breath.^{[SEP][SEP]} It is this knowable, loving and sustaining God who is at the heart of our own sometimes joyful and sometimes heartbreaking story.

And as we come into this Church with our own stories, the Trinity comes to us here at this Eucharist. For it is here, in the drama enacted before and through us, that we are meant to feel the very heart of the eternal love of God. It is here, as God the Creator, Son and Holy Spirit invites us to join God’s feast, that we take our place at God’s divine table, and join in that divine meal, through circulating three-person love.

Here we are meant to know and feel the hospitable friendship of our reconciling God, whose love heals all wounds. At this table Jesus comes forward out of the eternal fullness of God the Creator into his Real Presence among us, through God the Holy Spirit, and invites us to be a participant in His banquet, and a partner in His eternal dance of love for us and the whole of creation. It is here, in the taking in of His presence that we embody Christ for the world, that we can make real through our service the circulating love of our Three-Person God

As is often the case, it is the poet, who through their imaginations, can find the language to express both the significance of this mystery:

The Creator [Father] speaks, the Spirit and the Son / Reveal to us the single loving heart / That beats behind the being of all things / And calls and keeps and kindles us to light.

The voice that made the universe reveals / The God in Man who makes it new again.

Who [He] calls us . . . / To die and rise and live and love forever.

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