

“To Live in Peace with Ourselves and the Earth”
Trinity Sunday, June 4, 2023
Scripture: Psalm 8; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13

The Sunday after Pentecost each year has been designated Trinity Sunday on the Church’s calendar. It’s the only time in the year when we highlight a doctrine of the Church instead of an event like Jesus’ birth at Christmas or Jesus’ resurrection at Easter or the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost as we did last week. All of those are taken from stories in scripture and added to the life cycle of the Church to mark important transitions.

But Trinity isn’t really taken from anything in the Bible. There’s no sort of pronouncement of this belief from an authority like Moses or Paul or Jesus. In fact, there’s no affirmation of it like there is of God’s unity in Deuteronomy in the Jewish *shema*: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” There’s nothing like that in the New Testament declaring God as Trinity. Instead we infer that belief from the ways God is described by Paul and the gospel writers. For instance, at the end of Matthew’s gospel Jesus tells his disciples before departing into heaven, to “baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” Or, as in this reading from Second Corinthians, when Paul gives a benediction at the end of the letter: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

Even when it’s not direct, though, that Trinitarian nature is implied. John’s gospel talks about God as Father and Son and Holy Spirit. Part of our problem has been to hear those descriptions literally instead of metaphorically. There are some theologians and preachers who believe that referring to God as Father and Son means, literally, that God is male; or that the only valid way to describe God is with those terms exactly and any variation is heresy. And of course the whole idea of God as Trinity has been an obstacle to dialogue with Jewish and Muslim partners who also have heard those terms literally and concluded that Christianity isn’t really monotheistic.

This idea has caused a lot of conflict in the Church’s history. In fact, the first major schism, between the Eastern and Western Church around the year 1,000, was over the inter-relationship between Father, Son and Spirit. The Western Church, our ancestors, opted for a more hierarchical, linear model where the Son proceeds from the Father and the Spirit from them both. The Eastern tradition is to think more organically, the three persons of the Trinity are engaged in a sort of dance where no one is dominant but all are needed. I’m more attracted to the Eastern model than the Western. And I believe we’re free, a thousand years later, to make that choice.

Yet, Trinity isn’t meant as a way to define God. It’s meant to provide insight into the nature of God as we experience God through Christ. I’ve come to believe it can be summed up in the word intimacy. God comes near and becomes a part of us in Christ. We experience God through the intimate relationships we share with one another and through our connection to the wider creation.

That's what I hear being expressed through the psalmist's words in Psalm 8. I love how awestruck the writer sounds to realize God's majesty resides not just in the heavens but even in us: "What are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor." This ancient psalmist, writing long before God's revelation in Christ, understands the intimacy that exists between God and us.

I have to admit, though, I do take exception to the word "dominion" to describe our relationship with the earth. It's an allusion to the creation story, but that word carries the wrong connotation, I think. We think of dominion as control, that humans are meant to have authority over the rest of nature. I think that's really a form of human arrogance or more likely self-deception. We like to believe we're in charge. It feels like we are when we change the course of a river or drain a wetland or clear a rain forest. But we're learning more and more that our dominion is fragile. For everything we think we control, we discover so much more we cannot. I would replace that word "dominion" with responsibility. We have a responsibility for the sheep and oxen, the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea.

It's a responsibility born of our intimacy with God. Because we exist in this unique relationship to the Creator, because through us God's intentions are manifest, we are responsible for the preservation and protection of the rest of creation. A while back our friend Michael Martin who is the faith-keeper for his clan in the Seneca Nation, explained to us the practice for gathering medicinal herbs in the wild. He said they never take up the first plant that's found because it's possible it may be the only one. They always skip the first and look for a second to be sure the species is preserved. Their understanding is the earth provides what's needed for human well-being so we are dependent on the earth, intimately connected to it; we have a responsibility to treat it with reverence and care.

The ancient psalmist lived close to the earth, like our Native American sisters and brothers, so I suspect dominion meant something more than just power and control. The works of God's hands are meant to be more than just commodities for our extraction. And by the same token, those around us are meant to be more than clients for transaction. The earth and all its wonder, every other person in all their diverse glory are expressions of the God who meets us and invites us into relationship, into deeper intimacy.

This is the truth the concept of Trinity is trying to convey. It's not a test or some object for rote memorization. Trinity is a living, breathing reality; it's a participation in God. It's what the early Church mothers and fathers called "*perichoresis*," a divine dance. That's what you see depicted on the cover of our bulletins this morning. In Christ God invites us to join the dance of creation, to become partners with God in the healing of the world. Through that intimate connection, whether you call it Father, Son, Spirit or Lover, Beloved, Loving or Overflowing Font, Living Water, Flowing River, through that connection we are invited to live in peace with one another and with the earth. We're invited to recognize God's majesty in the whole creation and to honor that creation through acts of compassion and justice and generosity.

When we do that, when we join the divine dance, we become one with the God who meets us in Christ. Our eyes are opened to the connection we share with one another and all of creation.

Amen