

Trinity Sunday A 2017 Sermon

June 11, 2017

[Genesis 1:1-2:4a](#)

[Corinthians 13:11-13](#)

[Matthew 28:16-20](#)

[Psalm 8](#)

When I was a kid, one of my very favorite things to do was to sit at the piano and go through the hymnal playing hymns. And one of my favorite hymns was our opening hymn today: “Holy, Holy, Holy.” It was the very first hymn in my United Church of Christ hymnal; and I later learned that it was the first hymn in *most* Protestant hymnals of that day. I think it is a favorite for a **lot** of people, and I attribute that to the majestic tune to which the hymn is usually set, as well as to the majestic words, written decades *before* the tune. Take, for instance, the second verse: “Holy, Holy, Holy, All the saints adore thee, casting down their golden crowns around the glassy sea; cherubim and seraphim falling down before thee, which wert, and art, and evermore shalt be.” The image is of the eternal, unchangeable God sitting on a throne high in heaven with all the saints and angels falling down before him in worship.

That sounds a lot like the view of God that the ancient philosopher Aristotle had. Aristotle believed that there were 10 different qualities to all things. Two of those qualities were “substance” and “relationship.” “Substance,” Aristotle said, is independent of anything else. “Stone” is a substance: it exists on its own. “Father” and “Son,” however, are relationships: one does not exist without the other. Now, in Aristotle’s understanding, things that are **independent** of anything else – fixed, immutable, unchangeable, able to stand on their own – are of a higher order than things that are **dependent** on other things. *Relationships*, for instance, by their very nature, rely on other things: “Father” is dependent on “Son,” and *vice versa*.¹ Relationships are always fluid and changing: they grow and are strengthened, or they atrophy or become broken. In the mind of the philosopher, the most perfect thing he could imagine was something that was unshakeable, untouched, unaffected by, and impervious to, any human influence.

Aristotle’s view was influential for over a millennium in the Christian Church in the West. The understanding of Holy Communion in the pre-Reformation Western Church was **objective**, not **subjective**: what was important when one received Holy Communion was to believe that the substance of that bread is “body of Christ.” Receiving Holy Communion, therefore, was not about relationship; it was about the object one received from God. God was, in the words of our hymn, that “Which wert, and art, and evermore shalt be.” In fact,

most all hymns for Trinity Sunday are about the unchanging, almighty, transcendent God.”

But over the past 30 years or so, this understanding of our Trinitarian God as unchanging substance, seated high upon a distant, transcendent throne, has been shifting – so much so that it has seeped into popular culture in the form of William Paul Young’s book and movie *The Shack*.² The Trinitarian God of *The Shack* is eminently relational. Contrary to Aristotle’s understanding, this new perspective on the Trinitarian God saw *relationship* – **d**ependent, changing, fluid unpredictable relationship – as of a higher order than that which never changes.

Now, the understanding of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – as *relational* isn’t really new. A relational view of the Trinity has been the understanding of the Eastern Orthodox Church dating back at least to the saints of Cappadocia in the Fourth Century (each of them remembered on our Episcopal Calendar, by the way)³. Richard Rohr says that, in the understanding of these Eastern saints, “Whatever is going on in God is a *flow*, a *radical relatedness*, a *perfect communion* between Three – a circle dance of love.”⁴ Indeed, one of these 4th Century Cappadocian saints, in describing the relationship between the persons of the Trinity, used the Greek verb *perichoreo* – which means “to dance around in a circle.” That’s a far more dynamic understanding of God than the image of an unwavering figure sitting motionless on a high and distant throne while saints and angels fall down before him in worship!

Now, you might be asking yourself: “This is all well and good, Mark; and even makes some theoretical sense. But what does this have to do with me and my life?”

I’m glad you asked! If you and I are created in the image and likeness of God, as our Old Testament lesson today tells us, then the nature of **God** is also *our* nature! If God **is** relationship, then we human beings are created *for* relationship. Richard Rohr states: “I would name *salvation* as simply the readiness, the capacity, and the willingness to stay in relationship...” Salvation is the readiness, the capacity, and the willingness to stay in relationship, since God is relationship.

To be in relationship with another person means that you open yourself up to another; you are vulnerable to one another. “That’s why Jesus shows up in this world as a naked, vulnerable one – a defenseless baby,” Fr. Rohr notes. “Talk about utter relationship! Naked vulnerability means I’m going to let you influence me; I’m going to allow you to change me...”

“When you **don’t** give other people any power in your life,” Fr. Rohr continues, “when you *block* them, I think you’re spiritually dead. And not far from evil...”⁵ Strong language, to be sure! But I think there is great truth in it. What is it, after all, that motivates the religious extremists who slaughter innocent people – whether it be the Islamist extremists of today or the Christian Crusaders of the

Middle Ages or some of the leaders of the Reformation drowning fellow Christians who believed one should be baptized again or our good Puritan forebears lynching women as witches? In each of these cases, certain people had cut off relationship with certain other people who were different from them. And they almost always appealed to a God whom they saw as high and almighty, judging people from afar rather than relating to people intimately. Can you see, then, why Richard Rohr would say that if we don't give other people power over our life, when we instead block them, we're spiritually dead, and not far from evil?

Of course, it happens to us, most often, on a much more subtle level. We get mad at someone and, to punish them, we stop speaking to them. We feel entirely justified, since that person hurt us. But in "cutting someone off" from my life, I am the first one to suffer a kind of spiritual death, and I am not far from evil. For we were all created in the image and likeness of a God who IS relationship, and in blocking someone from relating to me, whether because they hurt me or I fell superior or whatever, I am blocking the flow of divine Life into, through, and out from me. Brother David Steindl-Rast says that this, in essence, is "cursing;" when I cut someone out of relationship with me I am cursing them. It stops the flow of Divine Life. St. Paul wrote to the Romans, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them." We are called, not to curse, but to bless; not to cut off, but to be open – to allow the Divine Spirit to flow into, through, and out from me to others.

This Divine flow of Spirit and Life is the heartbeat of the Trinity, the rhythm of the Divine Dance. The Father continually empties himself into the Son, who fully receives the Father in love, and continually empties himself into the Spirit, and on and on in an endless dance of love. This flow of divine life and energy is the foundational pattern of the universe: emptying in love, receiving in love; emptying in love, receiving in love. And the doctrine of the Trinity says that you and I are created in the image and likeness of God to be part of this flow – you and I, the Body of Christ, are, as Fr. Rohr says, the Fourth person of the Trinity.

But sometimes we remove ourselves from this flow. Perhaps we are afraid that if we empty ourselves, we will not be filled again. So we withdraw outside the emptying and receiving Life-Flow of the Trinity. We need to learn to trust, to have faith, that our outpouring will always be followed by infilling – though often in a different way than we expect. The Spirit, after all, blows where it wills.

Or perhaps our problem is that our ego self **prefers** separateness and superiority, and therefore shies away from entering the foundational spiritual flow of emptying in love and receiving in love, which is an egalitarian process without the competition and comparison which define the ego in our culture. The ego always contrasts itself over and against others, creating a dualism which is a totally different dynamic from the emptying/filling cycle of the Trinitarian relationship. In order to participate in the Life-Flow of the Trinity, we need to let go of the

competitive and comparative ego, and in trust enter the egalitarian flow of Divine love which is the very essence of the Holy Trinity.

I still like the hymn “Holy, Holy, Holy;” it reminds me that God is, in God’s transcendent Mystery, worthy of my eternal gratitude and worship. But at the same time, I wish there were other Trinity Sunday hymns which speak not of the immutable transcendence of God, but rather of the flow of love vulnerably given and received, the relational nature of the inner life of the Holy Trinity. For it is in the Image and Likeness of this Divine Dance of emptying and receiving that you and I were created; and it is in entering into this flow of love and life that we become what we were created to be: fully alive in God.

AMEN

¹ Richard Rohr (with Mike Morrell): *Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation*, New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2016, p. 44

² William Paul Young, *The Shack*. Newbury Park, CA: Windblown Media, 2007

³ The Cappadocian Fathers were (from *Wikipedia*): “[Basil the Great](#) (330–379), who was bishop of [Caesarea](#); Basil’s younger brother [Gregory of Nyssa](#) (c.332–395), who was bishop of [Nyssa](#); and a close friend, [Gregory of Nazianzus](#) (329–389), who became [Patriarch of Constantinople](#).^[1] The [Cappadocia](#) region, in modern-day [Turkey](#), was [an early site of Christian activity](#), with several missions by [Paul](#) in this region.

“The Cappadocians advanced the development of early [Christian theology](#), for example the doctrine of the [Trinity](#),^[2] and are highly respected as saints in both [Western](#) and [Eastern](#) churches.”

⁴ Rohr, *ibid.*, p. 27

⁵ Rohr, *ibid.*, p. 46