

Trinity Sunday B 2018 Sermon

May 27, 2018

Isaiah 6:1-8

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

*“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory.”*

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!”

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: “Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.” Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” And I said, “Here am I; send me!”

When I was a kid, one of my very favorite things to do was to sit at the old upright piano in our house and go through the hymnal playing hymns. And one of my favorite hymns was our opening hymn today: “Holy, Holy, Holy,” which is taken, in part, from today’s Old Testament lesson (as is our final hymn today). I think “Holy, Holy, Holy” is a favorite of a **lot** of people, and I attribute that to the majestic tune to which the hymn is usually set, as well as to the lofty words, which were 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.” That image (taken from the Book of Revelation [chapt. 4]) 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.

Now, 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 being “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 Aristotle, *dependence* implied weakness, and therefore imperfection. The most perfect thing he could imagine was something that was unshakeable – unaffected by, and impervious to, any other influence.

This view of God was influential for over a millennium in the Christian Church in the West. God was, in the words of our hymn, that “Which wert, and art, and evermore shalt be.” In fact, most *all* hymns composed for Trinity Sunday (as well as our Old Testament lesson, our Psalm, and our Prayers of the People today) are about the unchanging, almighty, transcendent God.

But over the past 20 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 the shifting viewpoint has seeped into popular culture in the form of William Paul Young’s bestselling book *The Shack* (which was later made into a movie).² The Trinitarian God of *The Shack* is eminently relational. **Contrary** to Aristotle’s understanding, this new perspective on the Trinitarian God sees *relationship* – dependent, changing, fluid, unpredictable relationship – as of a **higher** order than that which never changes.

Now, this understanding of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – as *relational* isn’t actually **new**. A relational view of the Trinity has been the understanding of the Eastern Orthodox Church from at *least* the time of the three saints of Cappadocia in the Fourth Century (each of whom are remembered on our Episcopal Calendar)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 on a high and distant throne while saints and angels fall down before him in worship!

Now, you might be asking yourself: “What does this have to do with me and my life?” And that is **exactly** the question we *should* be asking on Trinity Sunday! What does “God in 3 persons, blessed Trinity” have to do with *your* life and mine? Consider this: If you and I are created in the image and likeness of God, as the first chapter of the Bible tells us, then the nature of **God** is also *our* nature! If God **is** relationship among individual persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – then we human beings are created in God’s image *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. This makes perfect sense if we remember that, as we have been reading in our Sunday Epistle from First John the past few weeks, God IS love. (1 John 4:16)

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 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 our good Puritan forebears lynching women as witches? In each of these cases, certain people had cut off relationship and identification with certain other people who were different from them. And they almost always appealed to a God whom they saw as unreachable, 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, if 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 stop speaking to them, “cut them off” from relationship. 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 I am blocking the flow of divine Life into, through, and out from, me. Brother David Steindl-Rast says that this, in essence, is the meaning of the word “curse:” 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 cut others off, but to be open – to allow the Divine Spirit to flow into, through, and out from ourselves and into others. This is also how forgiveness happens.

This Divine flow of Spirit and Life is the heartbeat of the Trinity, the rhythm of the Trinitarian 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 circle 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 you and I 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 an oppositional dualism which is totally opposite 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 our Trinitarian God.

I still like the hymn “Holy, Holy, Holy;” it reminds me that God is beyond my comprehension and worthy of my eternal praise and gratitude. But at the same time, our Christian faith proclaims that God emptied himself into human flesh in the form of Jesus, who, at his ascension into heaven, has taken humanity into the Godhead, bringing us into the divine circle dance of love. And so 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: the FOURTH member of the Holy Trinity, 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