

Intro:

Happy Trinity Sunday everyone! We're gathered here today in celebration of the ways we've collectively come to know and experience God as Triune; Father, Son, Holy Spirit, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. The doctrine of the Trinity was hard-earned by early Christians. Much ink and some blood was spilled over the nuances of how we are to speak about God, because it's complicated! From the biblical witness we get God as incomprehensible creator of the world, as a humble Palestinian Jewish rabbi, and as we heard last week, the Holy Spirit descending as tongues of fire upon the disciples, animating and sustaining their faithfulness in much the same way that breath animates and sustains our bodies. Those are wildly different images. How do we make sense of them together?

If you're one early Christian named Arius, you might say that Jesus was created by God and as such just a little lower than God. The problem arising from that would be that if I'm an opportunistic Roman emperor, it wouldn't then be a far leap to say that I too am created by God and just a little lower than God. So what can seem to us like weird ancient disputes had profound political implications for the lived realities of ancient Christians. I wonder, do we generally have a sense that our confessions surrounding the Trinity have profound political implications? Now to be sure, regardless of how the emperor narrated his relationship to God he was still going to do dastardly deeds. Similarly, the present-day Church's confessions about the Trinity aren't going to cause the powers that be to have a change of heart, but we do believe that if we allow how we show up in the world to be changed, God works in that.

So how have we shown up in the world, and how might a fresh engagement with God's Trinitarian nature help us become more who we're meant to be? It's a huge and complicated question to ask about the impact of the Church in history. We could probably spend a lifetime talking about it and then some. So it may be helpful to narrow our scope. Thankfully, we're given scripture passages each week that help us to do that. What I hope can guide our reflection today on the Church's impact in the world is the Genesis passage.

How we've used the Genesis Passage:

What do we have creation accounts for? Why do most major religions include some kind of account for the beginning of the world? Is there a basic need in the human spirit to know? Does the nature of the beginning reveal something about the present and the future? Are these accounts essential pieces in our knowledge of who God is? People of faith have, for generations, used creation accounts for all of these reasons and more. The gift of these stories has led our spiritual predecessors into all kinds of beauty; think of the Jewish belief narrated by Rabbi Abraham Heschel that Sabbath is a Cathedral within time, instituted for human life and flourishing from the very beginning. The story of creation tells us that rest is built-in and essential to our existence. Or think of St. Francis proclaiming that "if you have people who will exclude any of God's creatures from the shelter of compassion and pity, you will have people

who will deal likewise with their fellow people.” His compassion for all creatures was rooted in a creation account wherein God deems *all* of creation very good.

How we account for our creation and the creation of the world around us matters deeply for how we deal with our neighbors, human and non-human alike. But it’s not an easy task to pull a clear, widely agreed upon set of rules or recommendations or values or norms from a creation account. Just as these stories have birthed beautiful Sabbath observances and greater kinship between human and non-human neighbors, so also have they been used to justify all kinds of violence and exploitation.

Many of our spiritual forebears read these creation accounts as license to violently export their cultural, religious, and economic ways of being to the majority of the world. They read the invitation to dominion, to fill and subdue the earth as a Divine Mandate to conquer and Christianize foreign lands and foreign peoples. Our Matthew text corroborated this reading, offering further justification for attitudes and policies like, “kill the Indian, save the man,” which accounts for why Illinois, named for the Illini people, has been swept over with European agricultural practices, a European economic system, and European people.

I bring up how these passages have been used because its not just ancient history. As people who look to a two-thousand-year-old collection of writings for connection with God, we of all people are equipped to see that history matters for our present realities. Not only are we able to draw incredible wisdom from the lives of those who went before us and laid the groundwork for the roads we travel, we also look back to discern what responsibilities we have as beneficiaries of histories that still haunt others. As we continue to discern what it means to follow Christ together in Greenville, Illinois in 2023, we have to keep even painful histories in mind.

So, in recognition of how these creation stories have been used for domination, exploitation, and the erasure of Indigenous people and Indigenous ways of being the world over, how might we read them more faithfully? This is where some engagement with the Trinity can guide us. I’m going to draw three lessons from the Doctrine of the Trinity and let them inform our reading of the Genesis passage.

Love Reciprocates, it does not Dominate

The first lesson we can source from God’s Trinitarian nature is; Love reciprocates, it does not dominate. Say that with me, Love reciprocates, it does not dominate. Love reciprocates, it is given and received, equally engaged in, by everybody involved; it is mutual. Now, it may not be immediately obvious why this is something we learn from God’s triune nature. I’m going to read you a small quote from the Athanasian Creed. St. Athanasius is an Egyptian Saint who wrote at length about the Trinity in response to Arius, who I mentioned earlier. In one part of the creed he says,

Nothing in this trinity is before or after,
nothing is greater or smaller;
in their entirety the three persons
are coeternal and coequal with each other.

Love, the very fibre of God's being, reciprocates; the persons of the Godhead, Father Son and Holy Spirit, are no greater or smaller than any of the others, they are equal, mutual, they give and receive in turn. And in such a relationship where there are none greater or none smaller there can be no domination; no subordinating of another's desires, needs, priorities, safety, or wellbeing to another. Nothing in this Trinity is before or after, the God of love is coequal within themselves.

And because we, through Jesus, participate in the life of this coequal God of love, reciprocity and mutuality become the fibre of our existence in the world. As we share in the coequal life of God, we lay down domination as a possibility for how we can engage with the world around us. And that conviction makes a difference for how we read Genesis. When we hear God say,

“let humanity have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth,”

we can begin to sense that the dominion God is referring to is not the dominating ways of being that we see around us and sometimes participate in ourselves. Whatever this dominion is that God invites us into, we can be sure that it is a dominion of reciprocal love. Of receiving as much as we give, of giving back in the places where we take. This realization raises a collective problem for us. Clara Sue Kidwell, Homer Noley, and George Tinker outline it well for us. In the book I'm drawing from they are outlining the wisdom we can draw from Native American theology, which is good for us to hear in establishing a relationship of reciprocity, of give and take, with faith communities outside of our own. They say,

“American technological and economic development cannot embody the Indian ethic of reciprocity. It is not enough to replant a few trees or to add nutrients to the soil. These are superficial acts to treat the negative symptoms of development. The value of reciprocity which is a hallmark of Indian ceremonies goes to the heart of issues of sustainability, which is maintaining a balance and tempering the negative effects of basic human survival techniques. There is no ceremony among any people for clear-cutting an entire forest.”

As we seek to embody the truth that Love reciprocates, it does not dominate, may we be mindful that this is a journey into God's nature that will inevitably lead us into questions about our collective existence. I don't say this to dismiss the value of examining our personal relationships for reciprocity. In fact, that's usually where transformation starts. I wholeheartedly encourage you to look at your personal relationships to your siblings, human and non-human

alike. Are there places where you're taking more than you're giving? Where you're giving more than you're receiving? Beginning to heal the dynamics of domination in our immediate surroundings is good and sacred work, and it does ripple outward into the collective.

We are not Meant to Do This Alone

And that line we walk between the personal and the collective brings us to the second lesson we can source from God's triune nature; we are not meant to do this alone. Say it with me, we are not meant to do this alone. When I speak about the personal work of examining the reciprocity and domination in our own lives, I don't mean for it to be individual work. In fact, how could it possibly be individual? Reciprocity and domination are relationships; they require more than one person. Whether we're looking at our personal, immediate relationships or the collective relationships in which we participate (as Church, as a political party, as a nation, as a race, and gender, and particular sexuality), we aren't meant to do it alone. This lesson probably has a clearer connection to the Trinity than the last one. Oh, God is three, God isn't alone. Yes, it is that simple, and I want to refer back to the Athanasian Creed again. He says,

we worship one God in trinity and the trinity in unity,
neither blending their persons
nor dividing their essence.
For the person of the Father is a distinct person,
the person of the Son is another,
and that of the Holy Spirit still another.
But the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one,
their glory equal, their majesty coeternal.

St. Athanasius' words reinforce what many of likely already know viscerally, God is a community. Rather than some distant deity who competes in the heavens for glory over and above other deities, God is a loving community into which we are invited through our createdness in the image of God and through the incarnation of Jesus. We get this in the creation story we're reading today, when God says, "Let *us* make humankind in *our* image, according to *our* likeness." We have been made in the image and the likeness of a communal God, as evidenced by the plural pronouns God uses for Godself.

So what does that mean for us? At least one thing it means is that we image God into the world best when we're together. So as we're examining our relationships for reciprocity and domination, who can we get together with to ask these important questions? One of the great challenges of being limited human beings with only limited knowledge of ourselves and our surroundings is that it isn't a simple task to identify where reciprocity and domination show up in our lives. Very often we learn dominating ways of being as normal, and they can feel like reciprocity if we're more on the receiving end than the giving end. So it's important as we're getting together for self and communal examination to hear from the people who end up giving

or being taken from more than receiving or getting to give of what they want to give. Because all our knowledge is incomplete! By ourselves we're only ever working with a few pieces of the puzzle, and it's important that we don't close off seats at the table where we're assembling that puzzle.

There are Limits to our Knowledge and Control

Which brings me to the next lesson we can draw from God's triune nature; do you remember the first two? Love reciprocates, it does not dominate, We are not meant to do this alone, and the third; there are limits to our knowledge and control. Say it with me one more time, there are limits to our knowledge and control. I'm going to get the Athanasius quote out of the way early this time, he says

The Father is immeasurable,
the Son is immeasurable,
the Holy Spirit is immeasurable.

Now, my temptation here when I hear that God is immeasurable is to think about size. How vast must God be beyond measure! I think that understanding it this way misses something important about God. It treats the persons of the Godhead like cardinal directions, everything in that direction as far as you can go is the Creator, and in that direction the Redeemer, and in that direction the Spirit, and depending on your theology, that direction the Adversary. Gives new meaning to "get behind me, Satan." When I imagine God in this way, it becomes easy to imagine the task of relationship with God as a task of accumulation; in the face of God's infinite measurelessness, it is possible for me to be the person or a member of the group that knows the most. That has walked the furthest down the path in any direction. And if I perceive that I know the most, that shapes how I engage with people I perceive as knowing less. I become susceptible to paternalism, condescension, and a desire to control others, sometimes under the guise of helping them, when I imagine myself to have acquired more wisdom about God than another.

And we've seen this in our history. What did Christian settlers do when they came to this land and encountered people who they felt had less knowledge of God? Kill the Indian, save the man. Boarding schools, praying towns, family separation, enslavement, genocide. In the words of Genesis, "fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." We seized control. So as we read back over Genesis, it becomes really important that in healing from this painful history, we understand God's measurelessness a little differently.

It's not about vastness; that there's always more to know, and especially more to know than your neighbor, but instead God's measurelessness is about paradox; our human minds literally cannot comprehend or apprehend the Trinity, no matter how much ink or blood that we spill over it. God is three persons, and God is one person. There is no human way to reconcile

those realities about God. Our brains would sooner explode than understand. It's like asking how many oranges anger is divisible by. Anger is a feeling, orange is a fruit, the math just ain't mathing. Such is the case with God. Immeasurable doesn't mean we need infinite measuring sticks, it means that our measuring sticks don't apply.

So what does that mean for us? It certainly doesn't mean that God is unknowable, otherwise we wouldn't celebrate Pentecost like we did with Rev. Kelly last week. Pentecost and Trinity Sunday go together because while today we gape in awe at the uselessness of our measurements before God, on Pentecost we cherish just how near to us the Spirit is, as close to us as our very breath, abundant as the air that has sustained us our entire life long and will sustain us until our death. What can we do in the wake of these two Church holidays but lift up our hands in gratitude and humility? God is abundantly, generously present in the minutia of our lives, and we may never fully grasp what that means for how we ought to live in the world. All our striving is but plunging headfirst into dark, murky waters and being given the sense, despite our blindness, that we're not alone as we go.

So as we encounter sacred others; as the Divine Mystery unfolds before us in the lives of our human and non-human siblings alike, may we cultivate a grateful humility together. One that allows us space for curiosity before the unknown, and trust that God meets us in the reciprocal spaces where we feel least in control.

Breath

This was a lot. In recap; Love reciprocates, it does not dominate. We aren't meant to do this alone. There are limits to our knowledge and control. Amen and amen.