

Matthew 28:18-20
Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Fred Harrell
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God is Love

One of the hardest things about being a pastor is answering the question “What do you do for a living?” Things can go along so well in a conversation until they ask that question. Talk about a conversational buzzkill! “I’m a pastor” is usually met with a pause, and then an apology for any swear words that have been said, and then a “good for YOU” remark!

Once, in an Uber, I had a talkative driver who asked me the inevitable question: “What do you do?” I told him. Surprisingly intrigued, he began asking questions, including one about how I’d describe God. I replied, “A Divine Circle Dance of Love.” He glanced at me in the rearview mirror and exclaimed, “What?!” I repeated myself, and he exclaimed, “If that’s true, sign me up! I love to dance!”

What I was describing to him is known in theology as Perichoresis, derived from “peri” meaning around and “chorein” related to choreography. Christians assert that God is three in one, a community of true mutuality; a living relationship of love and vulnerability and a profound mystery with huge implications if true. While traditionally labeled Father, Son, and Holy Spirit due to patriarchal influences in translation, God is also referred to as Creator, Christ, Sustainer, God, Savior, Counselor, Divine Parent, Incarnate Son, Ubiquitous Spirit, and more. God is love, literally. Existing eternally within a community of radical love.

Welcome to Trinity Sunday everybody! Are you psyched to learn some trinitarian theology!? It starts right there in the first words of Scripture. God is called “elohim” which is a paradoxical name, a grammatical plurality, but in a singular form. Later in the story God will say “let us make humankind” and there it is again. A God who exists in some kind of plural singularity.

And then in the Proverbs reading, this feminine figure, Sophia, mysteriously talks about being with Creator God as all things are called into being. “I was there” for all of that! Fascinating, no?

On my first day of seminary our professor told me something I’ll never forget. Whenever you are preaching, he said, always imagine there’s a person standing against the back wall of the sanctuary holding up a sign that says “So What!?”

I just introduced you to a mystery that Christians believe, complete with a fancy word, "Perichoresis". Aren't you impressed? Are you holding up a sign that says "So What?"

I'll just put it this way. I think God being this mysterious three in one, this Trinity, this Divine Dance of Love, could explain a lot about what a good community looks like and what makes us tick as human beings.

The community of God is not the kind of community we humans typically create. I would argue it subverts the things we tend to do in community.

We tend to create communities plagued by hierarchy, yet in God's community there is equality between the three persons of the Godhead. It's not like God the Divine Parent is the real God. The Son is half of it, and the Holy Spirit is just barely divine. No, the members of God's community are co-equal. The Father is not greater than the Son, the Son is not greater than the Spirit, the Spirit is not greater than either of them. You get the picture. Someone says, "Fred, you used the term Father, is God male?" No. God is not a dude. Next point.

We tend to create communities plagued by patriarchy, yet in God's community there is gender equity. Genesis 1:2 should read, "The spirit, SHE, brooded over the waters," because that's a feminine verb. Try as they might, translators can't keep us from knowing that feminine verb is used repeatedly of God in the Hebrew scriptures. And for our beloveds who do not fit neatly into male and female constructs the word for Spirit in the New Testament is neuter in gender, so the Trinity is truly for every gender identity or expression. We might say, God was the original they/them!

We tend to create communities of homogeneity, yet in God's community there is diversity.

We tend to create communities of power, yet in God's community there is power sharing.

We tend to create communities of uniformity, yet in God's community creative expression is what God does! In Genesis 1 we see God as explosive creative joy calling everything God makes "Good".

What does all of this talk about God being community tell us about ourselves and the community life we need in our life?

I have a few ideas:

We are built to belong. Hardwired for friendship. We are built for community, to love, and to receive love. We are, as Aristotle recognized long ago, “the social animal.”

My eldest child, John Mark, was the target of bullying in elementary school. It was awful. At lunch, he would eat alone, in the corner of the schoolyard, the bullies not allowing anyone to get near him. Of course, I talked to the principal, and teachers. No improvement. So I wrote him letters I’d put in his lunch box. So he would at least have the semblance of not being alone at lunch. Because I knew something.

If you want to truly hurt someone, isolate them. Solitary confinement, ostracism, rejection leads to pain, depression, addiction, and suicide. The human need to belong is vital. We are designed to belong because we are made by a communal God. Who do you need to reach out to today who might be isolated? How can we remember this as a community?

We are built to celebrate diversity, not be threatened by it. The three persons of the Trinity are not afraid of each other! Together they know they heal the world. Any rhetoric that diminishes diversity, ostracizes people, or dehumanizes and marginalizes them, does not reflect the voice of God. In God's community, diversity is cherished as a precious gift.

We are built for reciprocity, to have reciprocal relationships of giving and receiving, listening and talking. The relational community of God makes space for everyone to have a voice, for extraverts and introverts, for loud talkers, and soft talkers. This means in community life you check yourself on how much you are talking! To be intentional about centering voices that otherwise don’t get to speak.

I know this will come as a shock, but I like to talk. I like to tell stories from my life. And when my wife and I are in social settings when I talk too much, she kicks me under the table to make sure others get to talk as well! So who is kicking you under the table?

We are built to welcome others. Each member of the Trinity moves around the other members in love, generosity, blessing, and service. We are designed to encircle others in love, generosity, blessing and service. We are to mimic God with self giving love to all that God has made! To make room for all, to welcome all, is a premier mark of the relational community of God. It does not exist only for itself, but for those not yet in the community.

Do you believe Stone Church exists not only for itself, but those who are not yet in this community? Hard question. We will have to answer it as we chart our path forward.

God as Trinity is a model of community, and an index to the reality of what makes human beings tick, because, and here's my Big Idea: the Trinity is not a puzzle to be solved, but an example to be lived.

Maybe the best way to say it is to ask, Why did God bother to create anything? Why did God say 'let there be'? The mystics have always given the same answer: God is Love. Love seeking expression.

A friend of mine likes to say:

What is light? God's love in the form of photons.

What is water? A liquid expression of God's love.

What is a mountain? God's love in granite, so much older than human sorrow.

What is a tree? God's love growing up from the ground.

What is a bull moose? God's love sporting spectacular antlers.

What is a whale? Fifty tons of God's love swimming in the ocean.

As we learn to look at creation as goodness flowing from God's own love, we begin to see the sacredness of all things, or as Dostoevsky and Dylan said, in every grain of sand. All of creation is a gift — a gift flowing from the self-giving love of God, who is an eternal community of love. .

This includes you. You are an expression of God's love. Or as the writer of Proverbs put it, when God was making you, God was delighting in you. I find that's the hardest thing to convince people of, that God delights in them.

The invitation of Trinity Sunday is simply this: to step into the circle of love, step into the Divine Dance, and know you are the beloved child of the God who is love. Amen.