

TRINITY: GOD AS COMMUNITY

II Corinthians 13.11-14

Trinity Sunday, June 11, 2017

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

[from the anthem ...]

“We are not alone, God is with us.”

I need to hear that this morning. And sometimes the only way I can is to hear it from *you* when you are with me.

The writer brings the second letter to the Corinthian church to a close with these words. And because this is written in the context of a community, I invite you to read this with me.

And now, sisters and brothers, I must say goodbye. Mend your ways. Encourage one another. Live in harmony and peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the holy ones send greetings to you. The grace of our Savior Jesus Christ and the love of God and the friendship of the Holy Spirit be with you all!

We are not alone, God is with us.

You should know that the church in Corinth was notorious for its fights.

And, if you can this morning, try to imagine a church fight were people are fighting about who – or what – God is.

There are the folks we might call “transcendentalists” who understand God as that power greater than ourselves; who spend a lot of time praising God as Eternal and Almighty.

And it isn't just about what they believe. They have stories to tell – stories of addiction and how it was that trusting in their higher power saved their lives.

They have amazing stories to tell about times when they knew they couldn't fix things in their lives and they cried out, as Anne Lamott says, with that one great prayer: "Help!"

Perhaps they tell stories of resistance – about how the oppressive kingdoms of this world and the powers that be have no hold on them because they have given their allegiance to a power beyond anyone's control.

After all, our own mission statement says that "we will know no loyalties above those which we owe to God."

"Well, that's fine," another group might say, "but if you want to see God, you have to look into the faces of your sisters and your brothers." We might call them the "humanists."

And they have good biblical evidence for their argument because the creation story says that God created us, male and female, in God's own image.

Or they can point to that famous passage in Matthew 25 where Jesus says that when you feed the hungry and clothe the naked and welcome the stranger, inasmuch as you have done it for one of the least of these, "you have done it to me."

And these folks have important stories of their own to tell; powerful stories about how they know God in experiences of human connection and reconciliation.

"Yes, yes," others might say – the "charismatics," we will call them - "but it was the Spirit that moved on the face of the waters in creation; it was the breath of God, breathed into humans that made them "living beings;" it was the Spirit that inspired the prophets to proclaim good news to the poor; it is the Spirit that prays with us in groans too deep for words.

And, after all, didn't Jesus say: "God is Spirit and those who worship God must do so in spirit and truth?"

Here too there are stories; stories about the amazing ways things can come together to bless your life, ways that you didn't plan and couldn't predict.

So the meeting rages on.

And finally someone stands up to call the question. "We are done with all the discussion, it's time to decide which one of these is truly God."

The crowd erupts into even more yelling and competing ideas and compelling stories.

And then, way in the back, a teenager who has been watching all this unfold yells out: "Hey, maybe you are asking the wrong question; what if it's not one idea and one story but it's *one family* telling different stories?"

What do you think happens next?

The crowd goes on fighting. And keeps fighting for the next two thousand years.

That's why, I think, Kathleen Norris would say that "the Trinity is the primary symbol of a community that holds together by containing diversity within itself."

In other words, the Trinity isn't as much about God as it is about the kind of community we imagine and create.

I was at the march for solidarity with our Muslim sisters and brothers yesterday. Talk about diversity. And yelling. And different stories.

There were the socialists and the anti-fascists and the anarchists. There were signs that said; “Jews standing with our Muslim neighbors” and “Atheists standing with our Muslim neighbors.” I stood with a Lutheran-Episcopal pastor and a United Methodist pastor and with our friends, Arsalan Bukari of the Committee on American-Islamic Relations and Aneelah Afzali from a youth organization attached to the Muslim Association of Puget Sound in Redmond.

For a brief moment we were this tightly packed community with one voice of solidarity and protest.

And it was diverse. And it was powerful. And it was complicated.

Roxana Harper gave me a cartoon last Sunday that I promised to use this week. It is two figures – one appears to be Jesus and perhaps the other is some kind of therapist. And below the picture it says: “Everyone wants to know what Jesus would do. No one ever asks how Jesus is feeling about his complicated relationship with his father.”

Well, it is complicated. And that’s the point.

It would be a mistake, I think, to imagine that, if we could only figure out what Jesus would do or come to one understanding about God, that somehow our community would be more “godly” and less complicated.

The truth is, from the earliest days of the church, people’s understanding of God has been messy. They were forced to talk about the God they believe in as an expression of a diversity they called “Trinity” because they knew that any community is a complicated relationship that works toward a unity not based on static conformity but dynamic confession; that we do our best thinking about God and our best thinking about the world and ourselves in the company of one another, with all the different stories each of us has to bring to the conversation.

That's why this "faith journey" series we are doing in Adult Learning is so important. It's not just an exercise in story-telling. It's part of the way we do our theology. It's part of the way we do our thinking about God and ourselves and the world.

Hearing other people's stories might not make our life together easier. But when we do, our life together becomes more deep, more full, more "God."

So when it comes down to the last word the writer has for this contentious community in Corinth it is the language of Trinity: "The grace of our Savior Jesus Christ and the love of God and the friendship of the Holy Spirit be with you all!"

We are not alone, God is with us - the God we have come to know in our complicated relationships and in our different stories about grace and love and friendship.

And how we hold all this – how we hold one another in all this – is the best expression of what we mean when we talk about God.

"Mend your ways," the letter to the Corinthians says. I like that image. There is so much that can tear us apart. But God is in the mending.

"Encourage one another." And I like that too because, honestly, sometimes church can be a pretty discouraging place. We have been told for so long that a church like ours is doomed to die that we may have come to believe it. But we are not dead. And even if we were, we believe in resurrection. So our work together, in this diverse and complicated relationship, is not to feed our discouragement but to look for ways to encourage one another. God is in that power that is already at work within you to accomplish far more than any of us can ask or imagine.

“Live in harmony and peace ... and greet one another with a holy kiss.” Our welcome of one another and those who are new to us isn’t just an organizational strategy. It’s a sacred tenderness. There is an intimacy about it. There is a connection we recognize that touches who you are and who I am. It is God breathing in us.

I have known communities like that. They weren’t easy or uncomplicated. But, for all of their imperfections, they had the power to save my life.

One of them was a church in Evanston, IL. I was struggling to come out of what I thought was a failed relationship and a failed ministry. I was ashamed and discouraged and empty.

And one night, the pain was so relentless and the shame was so deep that I decided it all had to be over. I had to be over.

Fortunately, the logistics of my plan weren’t very well figured out and the morning dawned and I was alive. And I found my way to a diverse, complicated, some might say “heretical” community that held me; and helped me mend my broken ways; and encouraged me back to life; and gave me the opportunity to imagine that harmony and peace were possible no matter what; and welcomed me with the kind of tenderness that touched me to the core of my soul.

When Scott Peck says that “in and through community lies the salvation of the world,” I can tell a story about how that could be true.

And I have spent the rest of my life trying to make it true in whatever way I can because I know what is at stake.

For a while, at the end of every service in that church in Evanston, we would close with that old hymn: “What a fellowship, what a joy divine; leaning on the Everlasting Arms.”

Honestly, I never cared very much for that old hymn.

But singing it with those folks and experiencing, through them, what it means to be held in those everlasting arms, it became my confession, my testimony, my hope.

And as we sing it today with each other in this diverse, complicated, imperfect community, my hope is that, if you hear God's voice, you will not harden your hearts because someone's life might depend on it; your life might depend on it; the salvation of the world might depend on it.

So today, as we sing, if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (Riverhead Books, 1998), p.289. M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* (Touchstone, Simon & Shuster, 1987), p.17.

BLESSING

And now, sisters and brothers, it's time to say goodbye.

Mend what is broken.

Encourage one another.

Live in harmony and peace.

And greet one another with sacred tenderness.

Because the grace of Jesus

The love of God

And the friendship of the Holy Spirit

Are with you all!