

THE FOURTH PERSON OF THE TRINITY

John 16.12-15

June 16, 2019, Father's Day / Trinity Sunday

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"POEM AT THIRTY-NINE," by Alice Walker

*How I miss my father
I wish he had not been
so tired
when I was
born.*

*Writing deposit slips and checks
I think of him.
He taught me how.
This is the form,
he must have said,
the way it is done.
I learned to see
bits of paper
as a way
to escape
the life he knew
and even in high school
had a savings
account.*

*He taught me
that telling the truth
did not always mean
a beating,*

*though many of my truths
must have grieved him
before the end.*

*How I miss my father!
He cooked like a person
dancing
in a yoga meditation
and craved the voluptuous
sharing
of good food.*

*Now I look and cook just like him,
my brain light,
tossing this and that
into the pot,
seasoning none of my life
the same way twice, happy to feed
whoever strays my way.*

*He would have grown
to admire
the woman I've become,
cooking, writing, chopping wood,
staring into the fire.*

TEXT: John 16.12-15

I have much more to tell you, but you can't bear to hear it now. When the Spirit of truth comes, she will guide you into all truth. She won't speak on her own initiative; rather, she'll speak only what she hears, and she'll announce to you things that are yet to come. In doing this the Spirit will give glory to me, for she will take what is mine and reveal it to you. Everything that Abba God has, belongs to me. This is why I said that the Spirit will take what is mine and reveal it to you.

HYMN: "Womb of life, and source of Being"

*Brooding Spirit, move among us; be our partner, be our friend.
When our memory fails, remind us whose we are, what we intend.
Labor with us, aid the birthing of the new world yet to be,
Free of servant, lord, and master, free for love and unity.*

SERMON

The line that grabs me in this Trinity hymn this morning is:

When our memory fails, remind us whose we are, what we intend.

Of course we all suffer from some failure of memory. And sometimes we forget the most important things.

One of my life questions is: Why do I forget the things I wish I could remember and remember things I wish I could forget?

After all these years, memory is still a mystery to me.

“When our memory fails,” hits me especially hard these days. Many of you know that my mother is living with Alzheimer’s. In recent days she has started confusing me with my father – who died more than 10 years ago.

At first I did the thing I was told not to do. In the interest of the truth, I would correct her. How could my mother not remember who I was?

But, in the mystery of my mother’s mind, I am both her son and my father. Her failure of memory reminds me that I am myself and I am my father – in ways that don’t always make me happy; in ways that I aspire to be; most importantly, in ways that are comforting to my mother.

This reminds me of a beautiful mirror I saw in the window of a gift shop in Seaside. Carved into the wood frame around the mirror was: Mirror, mirror on the wall, I’ve become my mother after all.” Or my father.

My mother’s confusion reminds me of what our relationship intends. It is not my mother’s intention to hurt me but to hold on to those relationships that keep her from slipping away. It is not my intention to make sure my mom gets it but to give her access to a relationship that can soothe her anger and bring her comfort when she is afraid.

“When our memory fails, remind us whose we are, what we intend.”

I have to tell you that, under normal circumstances, I would avoid preaching on this Sunday.

First, it’s Father’s Day. And, while I “have become my father after all,” that relationship is a very complicated one. Not all of us have the kind of relationship Alice Walker talks about in her poem – although I am taken by her lines:

*He taught me
that telling the truth
did not always mean
a beating,
though many of my truths*

*must have grieved him
before the end.*

I know that many of my truths grieved my father before the end. And my mother, too, was grieved by many of my truths until life faded those memories or transformed them. And I want to give thanks today for the folks who stood in for my parents – and continue to do so. During those destructive times in my life there were people who loved me and gave me hope.

The point is: Father's Day is a challenge for good and bad and all that is in between.

I should confess however that it was 21 years ago on Father's Day that I met Patrick Green. Father's Day has never been quite the same since then.

So it's Father's Day and then it's Trinity Sunday. Some of you may have your "hermeneutic of suspicion" on. You are wondering what such an arcane theological concept could possibly have to do with you.

Just so you know, our Baptist ancestors carry the DNA of Trinitarian English Separatists, peace-loving Mennonites, and European Unitarians who rejected the Trinity because they thought it was unbiblical. Our Anabaptist spiritual ancestors were all over the theological map.

The one thing they had in common was that they were hated by everyone. The established church hated them. The reform churches hated them. English Separatists were imprisoned by the government – and worse. Mennonites in Europe, by refusing to fight, were burned at the stake or drowned by Protestants and Catholics alike. The Unitarian teacher, Michael Servetus, was convicted of heresy in Calvin's Geneva and burned at the stake.

All of them were persecuted because, essentially, they said there was no question that was off-limits and no answer that was complete.

So, if you have questions about the Trinity and you feel like none of the answers you have been given are very satisfying, our ancestors would say that you are in exactly the right place.

But here's the thing. Father's Day and Trinity Sunday falling on the same day is like wrapping up all our complicated relationships and all our misgivings about theological doctrine and all the intersections there are between patriarchy and theology and dumping them all into one Sunday.

There you go. Have at it. Good luck.

So let me just affirm what our Anabaptist ancestors lived and died for: When it comes to God and the world, there are no questions that are off-limits and there are no answers that are complete.

Or maybe as John says cryptically in the text for today: "I have much more to tell you but you can't bear to hear it right now."

Theologian Sallie McFague says that we have to recognize the danger when certain metaphors – like Trinity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – have been used for so long that they come to be seen as an exhaustive and exclusive model for thinking about God – that is the only way to talk about God. There are no other metaphors that are correct. In fact, she says, in the face of the environmental crisis in which we find ourselves, where
... we are capable of extinguishing ourselves and most if not all other life, metaphors that support attitudes of distance from, and domination of, other human beings and nonhuman life must be recognized as dangerous..

In other words, this unique and critical moment in history means that no questions about the ways we think about God or the world or ourselves, is off-limits. And no answer that has been passed down to us – as helpful as it may have been or might be – is complete.

So you might think that Dr. McFague would give up on any parental metaphor as a way of talking about God.

But she talks about a model of God that is Mother, Lover, Friend and she says that those parental metaphors remind us of an essentially human reality – we did not bring ourselves into existence. We did not give ourselves life.

And I wonder if, at ground level, faith is the recognition that life is a gift and what we do with it matters.

Think about the experiences of those – maybe even some of us here today – who wish, from time to time, they had never born and who believe that nothing they do matters. Think about the tragedy of seeing your life and the world in that way. It seems like that is the opposite of anything we would call “faith.”

McFague says that parenting is a God-inspired act of faith. It is “... profoundly desiring not our own lives to go on forever but the lives of others to come into being.” And there are a lot of names for that. There are countless relationships that do that. It’s the teacher who spends extra time with gifted or challenged students. It’s the social worker who helps people re-imagine their lives. It’s the librarian who passes on the gift of wisdom and a love of curiosity. It’s the zoologist who patiently observes other forms of life and the supermarket owner who gives discarded kids a chance. It’s the botanist discovering new strains of plant life and the rock star giving her talents for famine relief.

Where Father’s Day and Trinity Sunday come together is in recognizing that we have been giving a gift - not of our own making - and that gift calls us to relationships that matter.

It’s how, in the mystery of my mother’s memory, I can be her son and my father all at the same time.

It is about a kind of relationship that has many names.

And not just any relationship.

It's a reflective relationship.

When Alice Walker writes her poem about her father, she does so recognizing the reflection of him in her. "Now I look and cook, just like him."

In the text today, the Spirit and Abba – the name Jesus primarily used to address God – and Jesus are all part of this dance of relationship that reflects each other in truth and glory and belonging: "the Spirit will give glory to me, for she will take what is mine and reveal it to you; everything that Abba God has, belongs to me, and the Spirit will take what is mine and reveal it." All three persons are reflections of each other.

Think about those two great commandments: To love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind – you are created, after all, in the image of God – and you shall love your neighbor ... how? You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

That's not always easy. Do you have neighbors? It can be hard. It can be complicated. It's difficult for me and I live in a church!

And I know that Leviticus makes it harder by saying that we should love the immigrant or the foreigner as we love ourselves. And Jesus pushes us further to love our enemies as we love ourselves.

But let's start right here. Can you look at the person sitting next to you and see yourself reflected in her or him, knowing that how you look at that person is also reflecting back how you look at yourself? It's like a mirror where you see the other person and yourself all at the same time. And somewhere, in all that looking, there is the reflection of God.

It's one thing to love your neighbor. It's another to love your neighbor reflecting back on yourself. And I don't know that I have any more definitive answer about how we can do that than I do about defining the nature Trinity itself. In this model of how we think about God, it sounds like I need you and you need me and we need each other.

So, in the spirit of our ancestors, I want to throw my heretical hat into the ring. I want to suggest that the passage this morning indicates that there are not three persons in this reflective relationship we call the Trinity. I suggest there are four; "... the Spirit will give glory to me, for she will take what is mine and reveal it to you; everything that Abba God has, belongs to me ... and the Spirit will take what is mine and reveal it to you."

There is Abba God and Jesus and the Spirit ... and you.

You are the fourth person in that relationship reflecting truth and glory and what it means to belong. You are the fourth person anointed by the Spirit – not to have all the answers – but to announce that life is a gift and what you do with it matters.

I don't know how that all works.

What I do know is that when I visit my mother, in the mystery of her memory, I am both her son and my father. And my job won't be to straighten her out. It will be to look in that mirror that reflects her face and my face and my father's face and even God's face and to say I love you.

And today, if you hear that voice, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

Alice Walker's tribute to her father is included in an anthology of women's spirituality, *Cries of the Heart*, ed. Marilyn Sewell (Beacon Press, 1991). The hymn "Womb of Life, and Source of Being," is a new Trinity hymn by Ruth Duck, *the New Century Hymnal* (The Pilgrim Press, 1995), #274. The history of persecution of Anabaptists can be found in many histories of the Reformation. The story of the execution of Servetus in Calvin's Geneva is very troubling and can be found in *John Calvin: The Man and His Ethics*, by Georgia Harkness (Abingdon Press, 1981), pp.39-44. Sallie McFague suggests new language for the Trinity as Mother, Lover, Friend in *Models of God* (Fortress Press, 1987), see especially pp. 68-69 & 119-121.