

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Trinity Sunday
Sunday, June 4, 2023
10am

Primary text: Matthew 28:16-20 (NRSVUE)

Secondary text: Genesis 1:1-2:4a (NRSVUE)

Theme: "Go Therefore"

[prayer]

I want to begin with a brief excerpt from *The Africana Worshipbook*. The author, Rev. Marilyn E. Thornton, writes:

There is a tree in Johannesburg, South Africa, that stands in the yard of a Catholic retreat center. When viewed from one angle, one sees a singular tree with a very large trunk. From another angle, the tree appears as three distinct trees, down to the very roots. The tree was nicknamed Trinity—Three-in-One. The base of the tree became a meeting ground where we experienced community. There, and around its trunks, we discussed the deep things of life. No matter where you leaned on the tree, you were supported. No matter where you gazed on it, it was beautiful—three trunks, one tree, inseparable and unified at its base, drawing us into fellowship with one another. It was amazing.

The existence of this tree is a natural and compelling illustration of the existence of our Triune God, a God that operates in community to create community. Whether calling out YHWH, Jesus, or Holy Spirit, it is the Three-in-One God, inseparable and unified, that responds to our every need. No matter what name or office you call out, God will bear you up. No matter where you look, you can see the beauty of what God is doing.¹

[pause]

It is our inclination to try and explain the Trinity, but friends, this is a doctrine that cannot be fully explained. In seminary, my theology professor described his

¹ Written by Marilyn E. Thornton, *The Africana Worship Book*, Year A (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 2006), 34.

introductory course as “How to Talk about God without Being a Heretic.” He was being flip, of course. But his point was well made – our language will ultimately fail to capture the complete truth of our Triune God. I was made to learn the technical theological language for describing the Trinity: coequal, coeternal, consubstantial; hypostases, homoousion, filioque. I nailed that theology final. But when I sat for my ordination interviews and a local pastor said, “Explain the Trinity like you would explain it to a child,” that technical language was useless.

I like Rev. Thornton’s description of the Trinity: God cooperating *in* community to *create* community. All those technical terms I listed are attempting to parse the cooperative relationship that is our Three-in-One God.

In the opening chapter of Genesis, we see this cooperation in action: God the Creator, with the Word and the Spirit, cooperate to create the vast and intricate community that is Creation.

Lisa Sharon Harper writes in *The Very Good Gospel*:

“God created the world in a web of relationships that overflowed with forceful goodness. These relationships are far-reaching: between humanity and God, between humanity and self, between genders, between humanity and the rest of creation, within families, between ethnic groups or races, and between nations. These relationships are ‘very good’ in the beginning. One word characterized them all: shalom.”

God from eternity is relational. Cooperative relationship defines the Trinity, and Creation is an expression of the overflowing shalom of that relationship. Shalom is God’s vision of peace. It is a Hebrew word that means well-being, wholeness, the perfection of God’s Creation, abundance, and flourishing. Shalom is God’s dream for Creation: The way things were before the Fall, and the way things are being restored.

I spent part of this week with a group of people discussing what it looks like for Christians to collaborate with their neighbors for the good – the shalom – of their neighborhoods. I like the word ‘collaborate’ better than ‘cooperate’ because ‘collaborate’ includes the word ‘co-labor.’ God co-labors with Jesus and the Holy Spirit, speaking Creation into being, shaping it with Word and Breath. The Trinity

then co-labors with Creation to sustain it: God says, “Let the earth put forth,” and she does – she puts forth all manner of good things. God enlists the collaboration of God’s creatures to co-create together. The Trinity set it all in motion and then invited us to take part. And even though we have squandered this partnership, frequently choosing selfishness over shalom, the Three-in-One God continues to invite us to co-labor for the sake of communion – our common union with God, our common union with our neighbors, and our common union with all of Creation.

[pause]

Our Scripture lesson from the Gospel of Matthew is the Great Commission that has fueled the Church for two millennia. Communion = common union; commission = common mission. Both words infer the necessity of relationship with God and each other. Relationship is not a means to an end in the Kingdom of God; relationship *is* the end, the goal. Relationship is the mission. Jesus said, “Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself; the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matthew 22:36-40, paraphrased) – two commandments that are all about relationship.

Last week I preached that we cannot love our neighbor if we fear our neighbor. Fear of our neighbor leads to mistrust, hatred, and fragmentation – the opposite of shalom. We fear what we do not understand, and we try to control what we fear. Jesus’ words in the Great Commission have been used to justify fear-based behavior toward our neighbors – controlling behavior, colonizing behavior that strips our neighbors of their dignity and says, “I know what is best for you; be grateful, because I’m saving your soul.”

That is not what Jesus meant when he commanded his disciples to “Go therefore and make disciples.” He was not commanding us to go and force the Gospel upon people. Shalom cannot be imposed from the top down; it can only be grown from the bottom up through self-giving love. When Jesus says, “All authority/power has been given to me,” he is speaking of the power he *shares* in relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit – power that is creative, contextual, collaborative – not coercive and condemning. Jesus demonstrates this power through a self-giving love that teaches, heals, and proclaims the Good News of God’s Kingdom.

As Lisa Sharon Harper concludes, “Shalom is the stuff of the kingdom. It’s what the Kingdom of God looks like in context. It’s what citizenship in the Kingdom of God requires and what the Kingdom promises to those who choose God and God’s way of peace.”

[pause]

Jesus says: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (v. 19).

The Great Commission is an invitation to join our Triune God in creating communities of shalom. “Go and make disciples” means “Go and make students of Christ.” “Baptize them in the name of the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit” means “Welcome them into the family of God.” “Teach them to obey everything that I have commanded you” means “Teach them the way of shalom.”

Jesus made disciples by focusing on relationships. We make disciples by doing the same. We are called to spend time with people, share our lives with them, value their stories and perspectives, learn from them, ask what they need, encourage their hopes and dreams. These behaviors build trust. And as we build trust, we break down the barriers that fear erects, and we create space to share the beauty and goodness of our faith.

So, start there. This week, start by looking at the people God is putting in front of you – I mean, really look at them. Where do you see the invitation to join God’s dream of shalom in that person? Then go...and make disciples.

Amen.