



SUNNYVALE

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

728 W. Fremont Avenue • Sunnyvale, CA 94087
408.739.1892 • www.svpc.us • info@svpc.us

From the Pulpit

Sermon ~ Connection Matters
The Rev. Matt Gough ~ June 19, 2011

Genesis 1:26-27

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them 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.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

We’re taking a break from the seven lively virtues today and Steve will pick up next week. It’s Father’s Day, so Happy Father’s Day to all you dad’s out there. It’s also Trinity Sunday as it always follows Pentecost. Around the world preachers everywhere are attempting to explain the Trinity, One God existing in and through three persons. Our scripture reading from Genesis has God saying, “Let us create humankind in our image.’ Many have reflected that this is a reference to God being in relationship in the Trinity. The word Trinity isn’t in scripture but the Trinity is present in one of those places in the Gospel text of Matthew 28:16-20.

Like many fathers of young children, one of my jobs is to explain the reason behind absolutely everything. Yes, whatever it may be, my job is to answer the constant repetitions of the question, “Why?” Why do you have to pull the weeds Daddy? Why do they grow so fast? Why did it rain so much? Why was there a storm? Why does water evaporate? Why do the clouds move? Why does wind blow? Why daddy? Why don’t you know? Why? Why? Why? Daddy, why do you have a headache?!

Since this is a day that celebrates a significant relationship it's appropriate to learn from the Trinity since it reveals that God is a God who chooses to exist in an eternal relationship. The Doctrine of the Trinity leads many to ask how and why does God exist in three persons? Why pastor? Why?

I have a headache.

It's not an easy thing to wrap your head around.

There is a 15th century legend about St Augustine of Hippo, a great philosopher and theologian who wanted so much to understand the doctrine of the Trinity and to be able to explain it logically. One day as he was walking along the sea shore and reflecting on this, he suddenly saw a little child all alone on the shore. The child made a hole in the sand, ran to the sea with a little cup, filled his cup, came and poured it into the hole he had made in the sand. Back and forth he went to the sea, filled his cup and came and poured it into the hole. Augustine went up to him and said, "Little child, what are you doing?" and he replied, "I am trying to empty the sea into this hole." "How do you think," Augustine asked him, "that you can empty this immense sea into this tiny hole and with this tiny cup?" To which he replied, "And you, how do you suppose that with this your small head you can comprehend the immensity of God?" With that the child disappeared.¹

What I won't attempt to do is explain the Trinity in some nice tidy logical way. However, I will bring you three reasons why the Trinity matters.

Three things that the Trinity reveals about God:

1. The Trinity means that everything is connected or our connections come in threes.

We can keep our spiritual lives separate from what we may see as our everyday lives. Our work, our friends, who we are out there and who we are here, becomes too easy to partition. It's easy to live our faith in here and privately. But we often go through the day disconnected from God and not allowing the presence of God into all of our relationships.

When I had to hire college age students as camp director for a Christian camp, more than once, had to have a conversation with an applicant about what kind of things they posted on Facebook. Many expressed that they were two separate things. Who they were at camp, which is simply a manifestation of the Church in close and cooperative community, was different than who they chose to be at home.

It was sad to hear that some thought that they really could only live out their faith, while they were at camp.

Yet, I knew too well the desire to give over to God just part of my life and let other parts remain disconnected. There are parts of our lives that we want to just take care of our way, or isolate from our faith, from God. We connect with many things in life: money, people, time, our own talents and gifts. And God wants in on these connections and often we treat God like an intruding third wheel.

Everything is to be immersed, or baptized, into God. Everything, absolutely everything is connected to God already and God can transform our energy sapping connections to be ones that are life giving.

Mark Labberton, who married Christine and me, modified the typical vows when he performed marriages to say that we promised “to love one another more and more into the likeness of Christ”. And that’s exactly right. To do so we must give our relationship over to God, it’s not just between us two; it must be entrusted to God. This isn’t just true with marriage. I believe this is how God wants to work in every relationship.

God is present in it to make it a triangle, and through that connection and love we are transformed bit by bit to be more like Christ.

2. The Trinity means that our matter matters.

Or that God connects to us through flesh and blood.

I saw a psychologist demonstrate that boys opened up more to him if he would build Legos® with them while talking. We like to have something tangible and physical. Men typically connect with one another by doing something together. In the youth group we have advisors and mentors come and play basketball with guys and in doing so have some time for a check in. Many men connect with their Dads through sports. This can be true with girls too and a parent’s connection with their daughters happens in many ways and is very important too.

I connected with my Dad in projects and building things and fixing things. I probably wasn’t a huge help but my Dad invited me to help build a deck when I was pretty young. I think I bent more nails than I drove in but just being out there working with our hands was a connection, one that we still have as my Dad recently helped me recondition a wood play structure that I salvaged for my sons. Alex even helped a bit and painted and he constantly wants me to help him build structures with his blocks and in doing so we connect and talk. There is a connection in the tangible, in the stuff we’re made of and that we work with.

We are comfortable with the existence of God as God. A God so big we can just classify God as absolute and other. Up there in heaven or wherever we locate God. God can be entirely other and we can disconnect God from the tangible things in life. God created the universe and the stars and space and those seem so far off and disconnected from us.

It is an entirely different and astounding claim to say that God is incarnate, enfleshed, existing in and through matter, in Jesus Christ. All creation is immersed or baptized in the name of the Son, as well as the Father and Holy Spirit. The implications for this are more powerful than we can imagine. Popular Greek philosophy at the time of the early Church encouraged a dualistic world view. Matter was often deemed bad and Spirit good and the two were at odds, or even at war, with one another.

This is not the primary Biblical view of the world, however. Matter is the stuff of God, God created it. It came from God. We are made of the same stuff as the universe. All matter is connected and formed from the same energy. Science is even confirming that there exists a connection between all matter that is not fully comprehended.

In Christ, God shows that matter is originally intended to be completely good and holy and sacred and that God wants to connect with us in tangible ways.

So in dualistic thinking, we have God on one side, and humanity and creation on the other side. With Trinitarian thinking, everything is connected. There can be no separation. Our matter matters and our relationship to creation and others matters. Getting out into nature, having kids in camp, knowing how our food grows, matters. We are created to connect with creation, to work

with it and be intimately familiar with it. We baptize these connections and allow God to be God of the way we live in relationship to our own matter and all of Creation.

3. The Trinity means that God moves through our connections.

In Matthew 28 the Resurrected Christ calls his disciples to disciple, and those who are baptized to baptize.

This passage can trip people up. We all have seen evangelism done poorly, without love or respect. The preacher and professor Fred Craddock notes that some people misread that word “make” as though Jesus is commanding his followers to coerce people into becoming disciples. He says that’s not what it means. It means to “disciple everybody.” In the Greek it’s “make learners.” It’s a verb. Teach them. Disciple them. How do you do that? Craddock says the same way Jesus did—He loved them. He blessed them. He helped them.¹ⁱⁱ

Love is what flows between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As the theologian Karl Barth writes, Creation comes from an overflowing of that loveⁱⁱⁱ. This isn’t just something we dip our toes into. We are immersed into it and it is a current that moves and shapes us and everyone we come into contact with.

When we allow it to flow through us people will see it. As we move us throughout our day how many connections do we have with people? The coworker, the barista, the clerk at Trader Joe’s. No connection is an accident and every connection is one where a small word, a kind affirmation, and a helping hand, and any loving action may teach others how to be disciples. Even those connections we do not invite are places where we can choose to allow God to be present.

When I was a youth director at First Presbyterian Church of Berkeley an incident happened that Mark Labberton wrote about in his second book, “The Dangerous Act of Loving our Neighbor”. I want to close with this story from the Introduction of that book where he recounts the story of a woman he calls Doris:

Doris explained that she would have had the muffins there, but she had been kidnapped. That morning, Doris had parked in her usual spot adjacent to our church in Berkeley and was reaching back inside her car for her basket of oatmeal muffins. As she leaned in, she was powerfully struck from behind and pushed back into the car and across the console into the passenger side. Breathless, a young man jumped into the driver's seat and took off, with Doris riding shotgun. That Doris was in her early eighties, and had had her elegant silver-blond hair done as usual at 11:00 on Friday, didn't matter at that moment. Suddenly everything changed.

When Mark heard the news he rushed to her aid.

But that day, as other times too, Doris proved to be my pastor more than I could be hers. "After he took off in the car, the first thing I did, of course, was to ask him his name," Doris said.

"He said it was Jesse," she went on. "So I said, `Jesse, what are you doing?' "I'm kidnapping you so we can go to your ATM and get money out of your account,' Jesse told me." So I said, `Jesse, why are you doing this?' "He told me it was because he needed the money for drugs. He was addicted and needed a hit. So I just said, `Well,

Jesse, it's a terrible thing to be a drug addict. You really shouldn't be a drug addict. It's not the way you should be living your life." When being kidnapped, I reflected, at least make the conversation an honest one. By then, Doris explained, they had arrived at the first ATM machine, and after intimidating her for the password, Jesse jumped out to get the cash. As he sped away to the next branch, Doris said she explained to Jesse that he really needed help, that this drug problem was much bigger than he was. He needed help from God, who really loved and understood him. After the next branch stop, Doris told Jesse he also needed an effective drug rehab program. Jesse replied he had tried that, but Doris suggested he needed a better program than the one he described to her. Then she continued, "Jesse, God wants to help you." By the third bank stop, Jesse had hit the daily withdrawal limit for Doris's account. Since she was no longer useful to him, he pulled the car to the side of the street and explained he was going to leave her there. He had what he needed, he said. But Doris was not done. "Jesse, I am going to pray that you get caught for this, because it's wrong and you shouldn't get away with doing this to people. I'm also going to pray that you will be caught so I can not only testify you did it, but so I can plead with the judge to get you into a really good drug rehab program. You need to get caught, so you can be stopped and helped. You need God to give you the strength to get off drugs and have a better life. "Jesse was just going to leave me there, but I couldn't get out of the car because I was so battered and stiff. So Jesse said he would come around to the other side and help me, which I really appreciated. He came around, opened the door, helped me out, held my arm so I could get to the driver's side and then gave me his arm so I could get into the car. Then he put the seatbelt across me, leaned in and kissed me on the cheek. "So that's what happened,"

Mark offered empathy about how this must have been traumatic:

"It's true, it is horrible," Doris agreed. But then, without much of a pause, she added, "But the really horrible thing Jesse's addiction and what it is doing to his life."

"This sort of thing happens every day to thousands of people. There's no particular reason this shouldn't happen to me."

"Let's pray for my getting over this, but also for Jesse,"^{iv}

We were all struck by the way that this disciple never once disconnected from God in the moment. She never allowed herself to believe that God was not there in this connection, even though it was traumatic. I have a hard time loving someone who is in the express check-out line with too many items. Doris could love even the one who attacked her.

It's this total immersing of her life, of every moment, that allowed her to show Jesse the love of God.

This is the way we teach people to be disciples. My prayer for myself and for all of us is that we all will allow our baptism to connect us, all of who we are and all that we have, to God's ever moving love, to the world around us, especially the people we so easily disconnect from, and that we will more and more be transformed into the kind of disciples that truly go out and lead others to want to be connected to God.

ⁱ The Golden Legend, Volume 3 By Jacobus (de Voragine) pp. 105-106

-
- ⁱⁱ Fred Craddock, from his sermon “What God Wants This Church to Do” The Cherry Log Sermons, WJK Press, 2001, pg. 43.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Karl Barth, “Dogmatics in Outline”
- ^{iv} Mark Labberton. The Dangerous Act of Loving Your Neighbor: Seeing Others Through the Eyes of Jesus (p. 13-15). Kindle Edition.