

The Trinity, the Cosmos, and Sex

Sermon for Trinity Sunday, June 16, 2019

Readings: Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31; Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15;
Psalm 8

Sermon text: Jesus said to the disciples, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, she will guide you into all the truth." John 16:12-13

It's Trinity Sunday, time to talk about the doctrine of the Trinity. Are you as excited as I am? Maybe if I put sex into the sermon that will stir some interest. Will do. But first, some discussion of the cosmic implications of the doctrine of the Trinity.

The Trinity is a great doctrine, fascinating, profound, and worldview transforming. The One in Three and Three in One, the unity in diversity, and the nature of love. For what can it mean to say, as it says in the Bible (1 John 4:8), that *God is love* unless *God is in relationship*? Love is in the nature of God—first as Trinity, and then, inevitably, flowing outwardly as creation. And we are made in the image of God—therefore also in relationship, with God, each other, and all of the rest of creation.

So, the first point is that the doctrine of the Trinity undermines any completely static, hierarchical ideology or theology. We do not live in a world of oneness all the way down: one God, one king, one faith, one people, one way of living righteously. We live in a created order of manifest multiplicity made by one God in Three Persons, as revealed in one Bible of two Testaments, with four versions of the one Gospel, one Christian faith in multiple traditions, one world with many peoples, one reality with many ways to interpret it, one core ethical principle—love—with many ways to manifest it.

But what proceeds from the one source—the Father/Font—to Son/Word and Spirit/Life—and then to universe/mind—will eventually be manifest

as a new and greater unity. E pluribus unum, as our national motto puts it.

Here's how, as revealed in scripture. The incarnate nature of Jesus Christ, Son of God and son of Mary, has united divine, human and material nature. And the Spirit of God, the energy and power of God, poured out on "all flesh" (all living beings), is also the Spirit of love. And love knits together diversity into a new unity.

Thus, the flow of creation generating the awesome scale and diversity of the universe is also creating a new, more complex unity, the incorporation of the created order, finite and temporal, into the very nature and being of God, eternally existent.

So, that's cool. The doctrine of the Trinity has cosmic implications. (Read more about this under the heading of the Cosmic Christ.)

But it also has very tangible, daily life, real world, politics and family implications.

For instance, consider the scriptural texts today, and their relevance to some of the changes and disputes around gender and sex happening in our culture.

First, stepping for a moment back to the cosmic perspective, take a look at the way God created the universe as pictured in chapter 8 of the book of Proverbs. This chapter famously personifies Divine Wisdom—*hagia sophia*—as a wise woman standing in the gates of the city calling out to passers-by to stop and listen. Follow me, she implores them; learn to act wisely and not foolishly. Then, later in the chapter, the author portrays Wisdom as present at creation, at the side of the Creator. This is God (Father/Font) as architect—from *arche*, first source—and Spirit as master builder, putting the plan into operation (the Plan is the Logos, the pattern or word of God). Plus, an extra scriptural bonus, the Hebrew word translated as master builder may also be translated as child.

Wisdom is at the side of the Creator like a child, delighting in creation and the human race. What a wonderful picture of the Spirit as Wisdom!

Let me take a moment to kvetch about an unnecessarily male gendering of the Spirit in the 1979 Prayer Book translation of the Nicene Creed (the original was written in Greek and Latin). It reads: “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.” So far so good; Spirit is also Lord—*kyrios*—and Lord, though at root gendered, is now simply understood as an indirect way to say God, following the ancient Jewish practice of translating God’s sacred and unpronounced name YHWY as *Adonai*, Lord. But the current authorized translation goes on to read: “He proceeds from the Father, etc.” This “he” modifies the Greek original, in which the parenthetical clauses use “who,” as does our earlier Prayer Book: the Holy Spirit, “who spake by the prophets”, “who is worthy of worship.” And that’s because the Spirit is either neuter (the Greek *pneuma*, the Latin *spiritus*), or feminine, as in the Hebrew *hokmah* or the Greek *sophia*. I prefer using “who,” but if you are going to add a pronoun, use “she.”

In any case, if you would like to insert a bit of the divine feminine into the godhead, the holy Spirit is a good place to start. The Father, though male of course in human life, is theologically completely beyond gender or human personification; think of Father as source or font of creation, God as Creator. The Son, or Logos of God, is of course incarnate as a human male, Jesus Christ—though the great 14th century English mystic Julian of Norwich famously wrote about Jesus as mother. But the Spirit is life itself—she fills all things, becomes all things. She is love.

Having touched on gendered language and the Trinity, let me venture into even more contentious territory and bring the Trinity into conversation with contemporary concerns and divisions over human sexuality and patterns of righteousness.

This morning’s text from the gospel according to John is one of the cornerstone scripture texts for those who argue that gay, lesbian and

transgender folks can and ought to have marriage equality and admission to holy orders. The relevant passage is this: Jesus said to the disciples, "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, she will guide you into all the truth."

This implies that there may be a *development of doctrine*, as Cardinal Newman long ago put it. The claim from the liberal side of the debate—which is where the Episcopal Church has settled—is that mutual, loving, and faithful sexual relationships for same sex partners are possible and can and should be sanctified within the context of marriage.

Furthermore, persons gay or straight whose patterns of life demonstrate a pattern of righteousness—the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 6)—may be ordained if following a call to ordained ministry as understood by the church. These truths were denied by traditional cultures, including the Jewish cultures that produced prohibitions against homosexual sex in Leviticus and Paul. But those cultures also discriminated against women and condoned slavery. They were surely wrong on these points; doctrine has developed accordingly. So, it is argued, the fruit of the Spirit—kindness, love, mutuality, faithfulness—has revealed that same sex partnerships may also be blessed, and doctrine has developed accordingly.

But there is a restraining function of the Spirit's guidance as well. The Spirit of truth, the Paraclete, is also described in the gospel of John as reminding us of all that Jesus said and taught. That is, the Spirit also holds us a continuing pattern of righteousness and truth that transcends cultural change. This includes a prohibition against adultery and sexual immorality—roughly, promiscuity and lack of faithful concern for one's sexual partner. Not everything is allowed that calls itself love; there is still a biblical ethic of sexual behavior that condemns rape, abuse, including using children, youth and those under one's power for sex, promiscuity and adultery.

If you have an appetite for a full theological and scriptural defense of marriage equality and what I call the biblical ethic of covenant

faithfulness feel free to read my 2009 paper written on the subject, available online at helperaspartner.blogspot.com. Be prepared for footnotes.

So there you have it. A doctrine that unveils the mystery of a trinitarian God, one Being in three Persons, whose Being is Love from which all creation flows. A God whose love and grace, begotten in the Son, incorporates us and all creation into the divine life. A God whose love and grace, proceeding through the Spirit, grounds us in a relational matrix of faithfulness, mutuality, and love.

How great is that. Now you know why I am so excited when Trinity Sunday comes around.

In the name of God, the One in Three and Three in One, Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins, Rector
Grace Church, Millbrook, NY

Homily for Mary Lou Walker
February 23, 1928—June 6, 2019

Thank you to everybody for your support, prayers and help these past two weeks, especially those here at the community of Grace Church, who have befriended my mother these past two years. Thank you to Cindy—who has been enormously helpful and loving to my mother. Thank you also to the many friends of my mother from many walks of her life—to Peggy, one of her dearest and oldest friends, to my cousin Sue, to whom Mary Lou was a second mother, and to her latest chums from her bridge group and other friendships here.

“Every once in a while I meet a person who radiates joy. These are people who seem to glow with an inner light. They are kind, tranquil, delighted by small pleasures, and grateful for the large ones. These people are not perfect. They get exhausted and stressed. They make errors in judgment. But they live for others, and not for themselves. They’ve made unshakeable commitments to family, a cause, a community, or a faith. They know why they were put on this earth and derive a deep satisfaction from doing what they’ve been called to do. Life isn’t easy for these people. They’ve taken on the burdens of others. But they have a serenity about them, a settled resolve. They are interested in you, make you feel cherished and known, and take delight in your good.”

That is the opening paragraph of David Brooks recent book *The Second Mountain*. It describes Mary Lou, doesn’t it?

The Second Mountain is about the second half of life. You have heard already much about Mary Lou, her life as a friend, mother-in-law and mother. I could add to those stories of course. But let me just tell a little about the last two years, the summit climb of her second mountain.

Mom moved into the rectory gradually, spitting time with her condominium in Tarrytown. It took some time; we both had to make

some adjustments. But it worked out well. She made the downstairs room her own palace of memory and comfort. Her friends visited. But most of all, she made new friends. The community here embraced her and she them. It didn't just happen. Mom was intentional about meeting people. She started a bridge group, she attended Women of Grace. And folks here loved her back—they would stop by and visit. Including the young people of Grace Year.

But it was also her time alone that gave her joy. Or rather her time with God. Mom liked to have a quiet hour on the couch in the late afternoon, her favorite drink in hand, sunset outside, and Jesus in the room. Time for conversation, quiet reflection, thanksgiving, questions.

Thanksgiving happened all through the day—I would hear her first thing in the morning giving thanks to God. Even though I also heard her groan from her arthritis.

Questions: why am I still here? what can I do in this last chapter of life? She decided well, I can write a book about it. And so she did; Mom finished her final draft a couple of weeks before she died. It's called *Venage*—a word she coined from venerable and sage. We've made copies and handed them out to all here. We will have more for the back of the church later so others can read it too. In this booklet, Mary Lou gives her rules for aging with grace: accept, use one's imagination, be flexible, keep a sense of humor, and adapt.

She was good at asking questions. I know because my mother, a lifelong teacher, became a student in our Wednesday morning bible study. As those in the class can attest, her questions were sometimes basic—who wrote this book?—but never dull. The answers would lead us to unexpected discoveries. New vistas of understanding.

That is what she was all about. Exploring, connecting, conversing. Climbing the mountain.

She is with God now. Not as a stranger but as a long time friend. Her dear friend and bridge partner Elliott Lindsley wrote from Scotland after hearing of her death that heaven will never be the same. It will have to adjust for Mary Lou. Perhaps the well-aged wines at the feast described by Isaiah will also include some Monkey Shoulder blended scotch. Perhaps the room in the great mansion of the Father that Jesus has gone to prepare is going to need a few old movies. There will be dancing with Fred and Ginger. Our Gang will be back together. There will be conversation around the table.

But one thing will never change. St Paul knew this. In the famous passage from the thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians, he said that faith, hope and love, the three great theological virtues, abide—but the greatest of them is love. Faith and hope will change, for our hope is fulfilled in heaven, and faith becomes face to face knowledge of the one who knows us already. But love continues. Love never ends.

My mother's love never ended and cannot now. And our love for Mary Lou will never end—we will always have her in our hearts. But our love and hope and faith have been strengthened by her example. She has followed Jesus in the Way, one of an innumerable cloud of witnesses to the way of love. But hers was a great and exemplary path—we see how she finished the climb. We see she reached the second mountain's summit. May we be encouraged to do the same in our lives, and for our children, grandchildren and friends.

By the grace and mercy of Christ, Amen.

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June 22, 2019