

God is one. God is three. God is a community

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May 30, 2021

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British theologian James Packer, in a book titled *Knowing God*, makes the bold claim that our perception of God is the single most important thing in life because what we think about God profoundly affects the way you and I live our lives every day! Think about it. If you believe, for example, that God is essentially an aloof, angry, legalistic God who is constantly keeping score of your every sin and short-coming, you will no doubt end up in constant fear of falling short...of failing God – possibly even thinking you deserve God’s wrath! That’s no way to live! On the other hand, if you believe that God is essentially near, kind, loving and forgiving, your whole approach to life will be quite different. You’ll likely feel secure and accepted. You’ll likely strive to be kind, loving and forgiving of others...and yourself, even in those times when you inevitably do not live up to your own standards, much less God’s.

Today is Trinity Sunday. A Sunday many preachers dread! Why? Because most of us preachers don’t pretend for one minute to really understand the Trinity, and many of us, quite frankly, mistrust those who say they do! When all is said and done, the notion that God is a Trinity is essentially a mystery! Good Lord, the brilliant theologian St. Augustine himself admitted that! However, the notion of God as Trinity is profound...deeply profound, with practical implications for how we go about living our daily lives. Why? Because as my friend the *Rev. David Lose puts it: “At the heart of our understanding of God as somehow three-in-one is the notion that you cannot fully or finally understand God without talking about relationship.” And I’ll take that one step further. When you perceive God as Trinity, you not only start talking about relationship...you start talking about and living into community.”

Canadian theologian Stanley Grenz titled his systematic theology a *Theology for the Community of God*. Indeed, he builds his entire systematic theology on the biblical notion of the Trinity, tying together the themes of “relationship” and “community.” He states bluntly that “the doctrine of the Trinity declares that God is relational. The one true God is the social trinity – Father, Son and Spirit.” (Or, to put it another way, the triune God is Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.) And the primary quality, or attribute, of their relationship with each other is that of love. Amongst themselves, their relationship is that of egalitarian love.

Furthermore, that loving relationship has spilled over and outward in their work together in both creation and redemption.

Our reading from John's Gospel chapter 1 directly alludes to the creation account of Genesis 1. John 1 implies a trinitarian understanding of God in which the person of Jesus, in the incarnation, is referred to as the *logos*, the Word, the ordering principle of creation. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him...and the Word became flesh and lived among us."

While we only read two verses of John 3, verses 16 and 17, most of us are certainly familiar with the conversation Jesus had with the religious leader, Nicodemus, who came to Jesus under the cover of darkness in an effort to find out who Jesus really was. And in his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus refers to all three persons of the Trinity. John 3:16-17 plainly states that God loved the world so much, God was not willing that it should perish, and so sent the Son – Jesus himself - not to *condemn* the world, but to *save* it...to rescue and restore it.

The Greek word *sozo*, translated into English as "save" or "saved," carries the connotation of being rescued, healed, and made whole. Earlier in John 3, Jesus refers to God's Spirit as the one who gives life (as in the creation account of Genesis 2 – the breath of life). Jesus flat out tells Nicodemus that those who trust in him will have eternal life, being born again (or reborn) from above by water and the Spirit. In short, God the Father sends God the Son to save the world and all, who upon trusting Jesus, are born by the Spirit of God into God's family and God's reign – not by their knowledge of God or beliefs and doctrines about God – but by faith, by trusting in Jesus.

Thankfully, *Pastor Lose reaches up and brings the cookies down from the top shelf where the rest of us can't reach them, and he shares them with us saying: "At the heart of our understanding of God as somehow three-in-one, is the notion that you can't fully or finally understand God without talking about relationship. God is so full of love there has to be some way of talking about that love shared in and through profound relationships. Some say that's why God created the cosmos and humanity in the first place, to have more people to love.

But the Trinity goes even further, saying that from the very beginning of time the dynamic power of love that is at the heart of God's identity and character can only be captured – and that dimly! – by thinking of a love that is shared. God's essential and core being has always been a giving and receiving and sharing of love that finally spills out into the whole of the universe and invites all of us into it. First through *creation*. (As seen in our reading from John 1 today.) And pre-eminently in *salvation*, the sending of God's Son to demonstrate in word and deed just how much God loves us. (Seen in our reading from John 3 today.) In short, the profound love of God in Christ draws us into relationship with God, with each other, and with the whole of creation and the cosmos."

Church family and friends, the world is starving for love...the very love that God offers us in Christ Jesus. Furthermore, the world is starving for community...life together in which persons love each other as God loves us. Peter Block has eloquently put this longing for relationship and community into words in his timely book titled *Community: The Structure of Belonging*. He defines community as "the experience of belonging. We are in community each time we find a place where we belong." And in his chapter titled "The Fragmented Community and Its Transformation," he says that "the essential challenge today is to transform the isolation and self-interest within our communities into connectedness and caring for the whole. The key is to identify how this transformation occurs. We begin by shifting our attention from the problems of community to the possibility of community."

People are starving for God's kind of loving relationships – in our families...our churches...at work and in our schools. We long for community in our voluntary organizations such as Rotary and Kiwanis and Lions Club. We look for it in our villages and towns. In Geneva and Batavia and St. Charles, Elburn and elsewhere. All around us, people are longing for loving **relationships and community**. And as the church – Christ's body on earth – our mission is to do just that. To offer a community of belonging, of healing, wholeness and hope, as we learn to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbors as ourselves. That is who we are as the church. And that is what we are here to do. God help us! Amen.

* David Lose, *In the Meantime* blog, "Three-in-one plus one," May 25, 2015.

Invitation to the Offering

The best known verse in the Bible for Christians is John 3:16 which speaks of God's sacrificial love for us by giving us God's Son to save us – to reconcile us to God, others, creation and ourselves. Our God, the Triune God, is a giving God who offers God's self for our healing and wholeness. We, in turn, are asked to give ourselves, our time, talent and treasure back to God as we join Jesus in his ongoing work of salvation here on earth. How and what we give is a reflection of our love for God and others. So I encourage you to give as God gives – sacrificially and generously.

Now you can give in several ways:

First, you can give **online** following the instructions on your screen.

You can also give by **text** at the number indicated there as well.

Or, you may give by **mail** to Geneva UMC, 211 Hamilton St., Geneva, IL 60134.

Thank you so much for your generosity and love in giving to God through Geneva United Methodist Church.

Let us pray:

Holy, Holy, Holy God, bless these gifts with your holiness and your love.

Through our giving of time, talent, and treasure

may your Spirit blow ever more lovingly,

ever more expansively,

and ever more pervasively through every corner of creation.

Amen.