

Sermon June 12 2022 Rev. Brent Damrow: Trinity Sunday

SCRIPTURE: John 16:12-15

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

SERMON: “Trinity” The Rev. Brent Damrow

This week I had the joy of a study week. A joy of stepping away from the day-to-day responsibilities of church, and going to places of expansion. Long walks in Alford. An overnight stay up at Mohawk Trail State Forest. The chance to walk around the Clark Museum. And in all of it, thinking about a couple of things: what I learned in my time on my sabbatical, and then secondly, this passage.

For John is both a preacher’s dream and nightmare. So rich with poetry, so full of so many possible meanings, so deep and wonderful and beautiful. And it happened on Wednesday. It happened in the middle of a meadow at Mohawk Trail State Forest, when I was just thinking about this sermon, with this text rumbling around in my mind. What do I need to do to get into this passage from John?

Then the complete, logical, obvious answer came to me: the 1990 blockbuster movie, “Pretty Woman.” I said, whoa, I should maybe pay attention to this and go with it! So in case you haven’t seen that movie, in it Richard Gere plays Edward Lewis. He is a man who knows exactly what he is doing at all times. Well, he buys billion dollar companies to chop them up and sell them off and make billions more. A man who has it all, until the movie clearly demonstrates he doesn’t. Edward Lewis is a man who takes private jets wherever he wants to go. He stays in penthouses. He gets around either in his lawyer’s Lotus where he just takes the keys off his hands, or chauffeur-driven Rolls Royces. He is a man on the move, until, of course, the movie makes clear how stuck he is.

His counterpart in the movie, you might remember, is Vivian Ward, played by Julia Roberts. She has a far different profession, one she definitely hadn’t planned on, in a place so far from where she had grown up, struggling so much to make ends meet that she has a safety pin holding up her boot. A woman who seems to have so little, until the movie makes clear just how much she has to offer. Vivian Ward is a woman whose world seems so small, a few square blocks in Hollywood, until we get to know her and hear about her plans for learning, for college, for a life so on the move that she settle for nothing short of a fairy tale.

Two different people. A very sharp contrast. And perhaps in the movie no place is that contrast more evident, more plain to sight than in how the two of them understand, approach and use relationship. For Edward Lewis, the only reason to know someone is that they’re a means to an end. Those other people are people to be mastered. They are people to be played. For Vivian

Ward, relationships are moments to savor. At one point in the movie she says, “But I’m here now. That’s all that matters.” For Vivian, relationships are opportunities to give. “Kit, we believe you have real potential,” she said to her friend. For Vivian, relationships are the end which has no end.

In one memorable scene, I think the crux of the whole movie, Edward suddenly realizes that he can’t figure her out. He can’t confine her to one of the boxes he normally does. When she asks him about it, he says, “Hmm, you surprise me. And few people do.” Well, if you remember the movie, Vivian says something I can’t exactly say from the pulpit! But basically, she says that in her experience, people are full of surprises. Relationships -- an end without end, full of surprises. I wonder how much would change in the church if we actually looked at the doctrine of the Trinity that way, as a relationship, an end without end, and full of surprises.

In utter contrast to “Pretty Woman,” it was in Niebuhr Hall at Yale Divinity School where there was our TA (teacher’s assistant), an impossibly intelligent graduate student. He was flashing chart after chart after chart of the Trinity. The chart in your bulletin was the first one. That was the introduction for those of us who needed a little bit of help. And while we were all scribbling frantically, there were more charts explaining Jesus’ begottenness, and the Spirit’s proceeding, and all sorts of ways that the Trinity makes complete logical sense.

Fifteen minutes later, he finally looked up and turned to the class, almost a little bit sweaty from all the work he was doing, and he said, “Got it?” And the class burst into spontaneous laughter, which, just so you know, doesn’t happen very often in a Systematic Theology class. Of course we didn’t get it.

The Trinity – truth, mystery, beauty, poetry, motion. Never a means to an end, but rather a path to the eternal love which knows no end. Not something to master, but in a beautiful prayer I’ve been reading by Walter Brueggemann lately, rather something to yield to. Never something to be played. But something that plays us even more beautifully than our guest musician today plays the cello.

To read about the Trinity in the church is to come upon article after article after article about confusion. There is no shortness of controversy about it. In fact, here in Massachusetts, there was a huge schism over the Trinity, which is so ironic because the Trinity is all about freedom. It is all about connection. It is all about possibility. Just ask the kids who looked at that picture of the Trinity during Children’s Time today.

Today, if during the sermon I start trying to chart the Trinity, would somebody please break out in laughter? Because I really don’t want to try to explain it to you. I want to try to engage it. I don’t want to box it up for you, but I want to rip the top off that box. Not to solve the mystery of the Trinity, but instead to take your hand and together walk into it.

Aiden Tozer describes the Trinity as truth for the heart. He says that the fact that the Trinity cannot be satisfactorily explained is actually not a problem of the Trinity. It’s a benefit of the Trinity. Because he says such a truth as the Trinity, this perfect, harmonious relationship of individuality and connection has to be revealed, because no one could possibly imagine it.

There is an author, Anne Lamott, that I was introduced to here at this church. She is someone who ran from faith as long as she could. Someone who has a salty tongue. I only learned that after I recommended it to a number of people. But someone who always asks provocative questions. She has turned out to be a great blessing to so many people who struggle at the fringes of faith and society, those people that the church says are not completely welcome here. People who struggle with how much we as church sometimes try to make everything fit so neatly. Here's what she said, and I love it. "I didn't need to understand the hypostatic unity of the Trinity; I just needed to turn my life over to whoever came up with redwood trees." The Trinity is an expansive thing.

I remember one day when I was doing my hospital chaplaincy. A nurse came up to me with a smile on her face that I knew was trouble. She told me that a patient wanted to see me. Not just any patient. A patient who had become known to all of us chaplains there at the hospital. A patient who had come in for routine surgery that turned out to be anything but. Someone who was expected to have a 2-day recovery, and a week later was still in agonizing pain. One whose recovery was elusive. And so one who, understandably, was more than a little cranky. I came into her room. She had a Bible open to John's gospel. It may have even been to the very text for today. And she said, "I am at the end of my rope." She said, "Jesus is going on and on about the Father and the Spirit, and how one is gonna help me and the other is gonna help me. I don't really care who helps me," she says, "I just want help. But I don't get it. You're the expert. What does it all mean?"

And by the way, telling a grad student they're the expert is a really dangerous thing, because we so desperately want to be. And so I launched into my best imitation of our TA. I took a deep breath and I channeled that super-smart TA, without all of his charts. But I talked about the Trinity, quoting Scripture, one or two theologians for good measure. And to her credit, she neither fell asleep nor interrupted. And to my great pleasure and surprise, at the end of it she unleashed this big smile, something that no one at the hospital had ever seen her do before. And she proceeded to say, "Thank you! That is so helpful," she said. "What I needed to hear more than anything right now is what you said. It's to know that I am not alone, and I don't have to understand it all." Well, I can pretty much promise you, those two things I never said! But I'm so thankful that that's what she heard. And even more grateful for what she taught me in her far more concise summary. Eleven words: I am not alone. I don't have to understand it all. If we start there with the Trinity, we're already off to a great start.

What she was so grateful for is she said I'm not stuck anymore. And then politely but firmly, I was clearly dismissed from the room. But she put her still smiling face back down to the text of John's gospel, reading it again with joy and with hope, I think and imagine to see what else she could find.

Since that encounter, I have to say that I've enjoyed finding such summaries that distill something as big as the Trinity, and then invites us all back in to take that clue in this mystery and to keep on moving. Cynthia Borgeault, in fact, claims that the gift of the Trinity, more than anything else, is that it requires movement. The beauty of the Trinity is that it guarantees movement. When two can get stuck in an argument or dualism – think about our political parties

– a third piece can free it all up. What Borgeault says is that in life and in the world, we need to be looking for the Trinity everywhere. We need to be looking for the often missed third piece. When you find impasse, she said, in life or in faith, you are stuck because you are not seeing that third force. Edward Lewis, remember, was stuck. I wonder, are we?

Perhaps most of all, though, what I want to share and what I hope we know is that this Trinity thing, in the end, is all about relationship. Like in that painting we looked at during Children's Time, one that doesn't just exist far away, but one that invites us in as we are, and celebrates our own uniqueness in the midst of the holy completeness.

Catholic writer Mark Hart humorously points out that the church's Trinity is the perfect antidote to society's contemporary trinity. Do you know which one I'm talking about? We see it on the news all the time. That trinity of me, myself and I. The one Edward Lewis knew. The one that we all figure out sooner or later is a dead end. The Trinity, instead, invites us past ourselves.

Have you ever seen a video of Desmond Tutu speaking? To watch him speak – if you haven't, youtube him, because the man cannot speak without a huge smile and a whole lot of laughter. He just can't. And here's what he said. "Isn't it wonderful that we have this doctrine of the Trinity that speaks of God as a fellowship, a community. So you have this wonderful image of the community that is God, the Trinity."

What Edward Lewis learned in "Pretty Woman," what I think and hope we might have learned in this pandemic, is that when we truly enter into relationship, when we are truly in community, it is by definition profoundly transformative. Once you let someone in, you can't stay the same. You end up going to all kinds of lengths to help the other, to love the other, to save the other, and ironically and possibly you find what Edward Lewis finds – that if you save someone they save you right back.

That is what the Trinity is all about. It is a great gift that frees us from the all too human temptations to know it all, control it all, to take charge, to be our own person. It's a gift that instead invites us to simply enter in, so that all that is holy, all that might be shared with us – that's what John's gospel is talking about. Not that we possess it, notice. John didn't say that. But instead that is shared with us, that is spoken to us, that we might hear it, that everything that God spoke in Jesus might be given to us, that we might be guided further into it.

One of my absolute favorite voices right now is Rachel Held Evans, because she has such deep faith. She has such profound questions about how that faith and these things of doctrines – which are important – play out amidst the reality of humanity. One of the reasons I'm so fascinated with her also is that I wonder because her life was cut far too short, I wonder what I could have kept learning from her. Rachel Held Evans, like Vivian Ward, found herself in church often in places she never wanted to be. In churches that limited, that confined. But she always knew that she was not stuck.

Here's what she said that I want to leave you with. "The Holy Trinity doesn't need our permission to carry on in their endlessly resourceful work of making all things new. That we are

invited to catch even a glimpse of the splendor is grace. All of it, every breath and every second is grace.”

And so as you stand to sing this next hymn, a hymn that I bet you know by heart, a hymn I bet you’ve sung dozens of times, a hymn that is full of glory and majesty, a hymn of big dogmatic truth – don’t sing it as a way of capturing that truth. But instead, sing so that you are captured by it. Don’t sing it as the truth that you think you know, but instead, as John’s gospel said, the truth that will guide you ever deeper. But above all, sing it in joy. Sing it in community. Look around this room if you need to. Sing it in love. And while you do, feel the Trinity at work even now.

Friends, let us stand and sing “Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!”