

Sermon for Trinity Sunday

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Lord almighty, that gospel music is good for my soul. Makes me feel like I'm back in the South again, but like, in a good way. Sorry Zoom folks from the South Annex, but also, like, you get it.

I grew up in an amazing place. A beautiful creek cuts through the middle of town. Everything there's hills, hollers, ancient caves, and water. Arrowheads grow up out of the ground when it rains. Elk migrate just outside of town, slate crumbles and piles up at the base of roadside waterfalls. It's an amazing place to grow up. It's also been nicknamed "The Most Racist Town in America." It shows up in national news from time to time for whatever racist thing du jour they've done this time. Billboards, hooded rallies, nooses in the courtyard, you get the idea. It's an amazing place to grow up, assuming you aren't black or gay or liberal or the wrong kind of conservative. The community itself is far from perfect.

Later on, I went to high school in another amazing place. It's an old hotel from the days of the Santa Fe railroad, a Queen Anne style castle, complete with turret and fancy chandeliers. There's hot springs, mountains, reservoirs, land so dry it cracks underfoot and water so precious you aren't sure if you're legally allowed to look at it. The campus is delightful, and its residents more so. 200 students from around 90 countries live together, work out differences, and learn how to love across all the reasons not to. Beautiful as that is, sometimes working out differences ends in just accepting that one person is someone you can't spend too much time around. The community is amazing, but suffice it to say, it's far from perfect, too.

I've said this before, but on Trinity Sunday, there's an expectation that the preacher might have something to say about the Trinity. Maybe it's a treatise on orthodoxy, maybe it's a series of metaphors that break down too easily, maybe it's 10 to 12 minutes of dull regurgitation of a half-remembered seminary lecture. The thing is, outside of some very precise human language, it's impossible to say much of anything without wading into the thick mud of ancient debates. Also, no matter what we say, we always end up in the same place. Ultimately, the Trinity's a mystery. Sometimes that sounds like a cop out. But mystery shouldn't be a way to get out of the question. I think mystery might be the entire point of the Trinity. By the way, "mystery" is not a Hercule Poirot-style murder mystery to be solved. "Mystery" is something that inherently does not have an answer. No matter how brilliant you are, we all come to the end of our understanding. While what we can say might point us sorta kinda in a direction approximating the truth of God's existence, inevitably we come to our limits. And that's the place where the Trinity becomes most real. For me, it's not in the lines of an ancient creed but there in that place where I don't have a single clue what's going on. That's mystery.

Now, with that said, there is one way of talking about the Trinity that's working for me these days. So, God is one-in-three and three-in-one: you want more of that kind of stuff, the Book of Common Prayer's got ya covered. But there's this old idea that the Trinity is less of an entity to be defined and more like an experience. Like a fusion from Steven Universe, if that's your jam. This experience whirls in eternal dance, a perfect community of love. It's a beautiful image, but so what? What does that have to do with anything? Well, frankly, I don't know. But it points back at this world and makes me wonder. Have I ever experienced perfect community? A flawless dance of humanity so interconnected that every movement complements every movement with no error, no pain, no prejudice, no hate. Or, less extreme, no unintentional insult, no unavoidable friction. Well, no, no I haven't. Look, I've lived a lot of places, but there's never perfection. There's another old idea that says living in community is like being stones in a bag polishing each other to smoothness. We are no perfect dance, but maybe that perfect dance shows us that while perfect community isn't entirely possible, perfect community can remain our goal. We'll fall short, unfathomable mysteries that we are not, but we still hold that perfect community as the unattainable beauty we work towards.

Last week, I said if I could fill these pews with a hundred trans kids or a hundred red hats, I'd do either in a heartbeat. I stand by that. But, I've got a caveat. If I could fill these pews with a hundred people willing to move towards perfect, unfailing, loving community, I'd do it in a heartbeat. I don't care what your identity is, so long as you're up for fanning those flames. But a hundred anybody that wanna fill these pews and break community, I've got no time for that. Our mission is love, modeled in perfect community, and part of getting to that impossible place is being clear with what's unacceptable. *What's* unacceptable, not *who*. Back in my hometown, the intense and deeply rooted racism is unacceptable, obviously. Name it. There's no dance there, there's cornered people terrified for their lives. Give me a hundred of those huddled masses. But if you come inside, you leave your hate at the altar and you do not pick it up again.

I just saw a ranking of states based on how safe it is to be gay there. My home state of Arkansas ranked 50th. There, it's not just uncomfortable, it's not just hard, it's deadly. There's a whole swath of states battling for that bottom spot, and it's happening out of hate. Perfect community cannot be perfect for some and not all. It's gotta include, fully and truly include, everyone. And y'all, our nation fails at this miserably. It's not just "the gay stuff" as someone dismissively described it to me the other day. It's race, it's gender, it's income, it's access to medical care, it's ableism, it's sexism, it's ageism, it's a list that'd take us from now 'til next Sunday to finish. Part of that Trinity mystery starts with the world we live in. No wonder perfect community's impossible to imagine. Even my favorite sci-fi utopian visions eventually expose some horrifying secret. Perfect community's a long way off, but that doesn't get us off the hook.

Now, if you haven't been blinded by rainbows already, it's Pride month, which means we've got a few weeks to celebrate people we love, some of us celebrate our own identities, and take a hard look at where we fall short of perfect community. If your first reaction to all those rainbows is to bristle or get angry, take a look at why that might be. Don't let the hate we're fed win. Step back. Open your heart. Imagine how different your life could be if love was your first reaction. Imagine how different your community could be. These days, perfect community seems far away on its own, but as if that wasn't bad enough, there are people actively driving a wedge between us and that sacred community. So long as we stay distracted by our differences, we'll never address our deep social ills, and y'all, there's plenty.

One last thing, and I'll sit down. By the way, never trust a preacher when they say "one last thing, and I'll sit down." In our Creation myth, there's a line that roots us in being created in God's image. Every single one of us, in God's image. It means each of you carries some unique-to-you, tiny sliver of the image of God. We aren't God, but everyone reflects something of God that no one else does. If that's so, then I've gotta move in the world knowing that to be true, not all puffed up, but aware of the responsibility that sacred sliver requires. Also, it means I gotta move in the world knowing that you carry that sacred sliver, too. The more I learn of you, and the more of you I learn, the fuller my image of God becomes.

Maybe working toward perfect community lies in that idea, that our image of God, our understanding of the Trinity remains incomplete as long as any single person's missing from our ranks, and it suffers greatly when we refuse to let someone or some kind of someone in. Put differently, how much of God does hatred keep us from seeing? Perfect community means total inclusion, an idea so far-flung from our reality that it seems impossible. And maybe, if we're not careful, the whole mystery idea here gives us a sneaky way out. If it's a mystery and if it's impossible, then why bother? But y'all aren't those kind of people. You're a loving people that want to love more, you're a curious people that want to know more, you're a faithful people that want to, uh, faith more. Open your hearts even wider than they already are, St. Thomas', and we'll inch our way toward a growing image of God. Perfect community's a long way off, but with love and hope and open doors and open hearts, we'll get a little closer. I have no idea what we'll find there or what we'll look like when we do. But maybe that's the point. Maybe, maybe it's a mystery.