

Highland Presbyterian Church
Trinity Sunday – May 26th, 2024
A sermon by Megan McCarty

Isaiah 6:1-8

Romans 8:12-17

I have a sticker on my refrigerator that says, “Love is real, and we can prove it.” These are lyrics from Matt Black’s song *Everything is Terrible and No One is Okay* - arguably one of the best song titles of all time. Matt has graciously accepted the invitation to play this song as the anthem in today’s service, so you will get to hear what it sounds like in its entirety in just a bit. But that lyric is one that sticks out to me today.

You see, it’s Trinity Sunday in the life of our church, the day when we celebrate the beautiful mystery and authenticity of God’s character; the idea that God is Creator, Jesus, and Holy Spirit. Three in one and one in three, math that does not add up, a concept that is impossible for us to understand and a term that is not even listed anywhere in the Bible. The word and doctrine of “Trinity” doesn’t appear in the Bible because it came out of the Council of Nicea in 325 CE. Although the doctrine didn’t exist in the Bible, the concept is obviously present throughout the entirety. These two passages we read today give us different glimpses of the Parent, Son, Spirit connection and the ways in which we insert ourselves into the relationship as well. If I had titled this sermon, I probably would have named it “The Trinity is real, and we can prove it,” because that is exactly what I plan on doing today.

Much like the concept of “love,” many people across many eras and continents have tried to put words together to describe the Trinity. But it doesn’t really work. Our language only gets us so far in describing things that you can only understand through feeling or experience. We know the reality of experiences we’ve had - maybe in worship or in nature – the experiences that we would describe as “holy.” Many people would describe that as the Holy Spirit at work, but we don’t know for a fact what that physically looks like. We were not among the first believers who got to see flames dancing above their heads, like we celebrated last week with Pentecost. I’m going to guess that most of us here could not describe the Holy Spirit’s appearance, but I’m also going to guess that a lot of us could describe a feeling you’ve had that you would label as “Godly” or “Spiritual.” Although our words would still not do it justice.

Isaiah 6 attempts to put words to one of those spiritual moments. This is the “call story” for the prophet Isaiah. It unveils a pivotal moment where Isaiah encounters the glory of God and receives a commission to speak to a people who hear but never understand, who see but never perceive. This passage delves into a divine revelation that shapes Isaiah’s identity, his mission, and the timeless nature of divine encounters with humanity. The vivid imagery highlights God’s majesty and sovereignty. The depiction of God as “high and exalted” portrays God’s unshakable authority, transcending earthly limitations. God does not die as King Uzziah did. The king’s death signaled the end of an era, but God’s reign stands forever. This vision teaches us about worship, about the nature of God, and about ministry, both in the time of the prophet and today.

This scripture and the church confirm both the transcendence and immanence of God. We as the church need both traits. The transcendence of God communicates divine strength, even in the face of evil. Divine immanence communicates approachability, care, and involvement. The Lord is “high and lofty.” The seraphim praise God’s holiness, the divine otherness, separation from the world. Yet this transcendent, holy God cares about what happens in the world and so God calls the prophet to minister to the people.

As we begin to think about God’s character in Isaiah, we hear Paul’s letter to the Romans. Now, it's important for us to recognize that what we just read is not Paul’s full letter to the Romans, nor is it even a full paragraph in the letter to the Romans. What we read is just a small section in a much larger context. It’s like we arrived to class late, and we walk in to the teacher already in the middle of a lecture and we are having to piece together what was said earlier by the context of what we hear happening now. What Paul has previously described is a fundamental dilemma facing humankind. The power of sin, dwelling within us, prevents us from doing what is good and right. This sin isn’t just within us, it’s all around us; it’s in the systems that we buy into - sometimes without thought - it’s in our well made plans and our very best intentions. It is baked into every moment of our lives. But, thankfully, that’s not the end of the story.

Now, there are a lot of things about Paul’s letters that I dislike. One of which is the fact that he uses the word translated as “flesh” to talk about sinfulness. There are a lot of ways that this has been weaponized in Christianity over the years. So, let me say this now: our bodies are not sinful, our bodies are beautiful gifts from our creator. Our flesh is not the problem. When Paul says living “according to the flesh” he is saying that we are living for what is transient, pursuing self-interests at the expense of others, and ignoring the presence of God. He uses the term “flesh” as a metaphor for the human tendency to seek and to possess all that brings immediate satisfaction to one’s own self without regard for a spiritual perspective and without regard for others.

The consequence of this way of living is death, Paul says. But this, too, is a metaphor. It does not mean physical death, but a dying of the self as God intends us to be, a spiritual death. If we deny the spiritual parts of us the chance to live as God desires, we feel dead. We feel extreme negative emotions and we end up falling into sin by treating other people horribly and only living for what makes us feel the slightest bit of pleasure.

But Paul’s letter as we come into it now talks about a different way of life – living into our full selves, exactly as God intended us. Paul uses the terms “adoption” and “slavery” which we understand, but not in the way that a first century Roman might understand them. In the ancient Roman world, children were sold into slavery or abandoned if their families could not afford to raise them. This was obviously a cruel and crushing reality that no one would desire for their lives. Roman society placed a high value on producing offspring and heirs, and childless couples of means were often eager to adopt. Under Roman law, as with our own, adopted children had the same legal status and inheritance rights as biological children.

When Paul writes, “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption,” Paul is assuring his readers that although we struggle in a world of sin and death, we have not been abandoned to lives of slavery and fear. In Christ, God has adopted us as God’s very own children and heirs. Being a son or child, in contrast to being a slave, afforded one a different, privileged status. Children, even adopted children, were afforded intimacy, status, and autonomy. Their social relationships were ordered by freedom, not forced, obligation. This intimacy is indicated by the fact that believers can cry out “Abba! Father!” While “Abba” is the Aramaic word for “father,” it’s used here more as a term of endearment, a name for a familial close relationship. Both “Abba” and “Father” would have been inappropriate terms for an enslaved person to use with respect to the head of the household.

The adoption metaphor also sheds light on the reality of our lives as children of God. The adoption papers have been signed; we have been sealed by the Spirit at baptism. Yet we continue to experience anguish and suffering while we wait for the completion of our adoption, “the redemption of our bodies.” Whatever evil or suffering we succumb to, we have the blessed assurance that God will see to the completion of our adoption, and nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Adoption into God’s family is the work of the Spirit: it is the Spirit that leads us, that bears witness with us when we cry out, and that dwells within us. Elsewhere in Romans we learn that this Spirit intercedes when words fail us, “with sighs too deep for words.” It is the same Spirit through which the love of God is poured into our hearts. Christ is a joint heir with us; he suffers and is glorified, and we suffer and are glorified right along with him. What happens to Christ in resurrection, happens to us; the glory that belongs to God’s son, belongs to us as well.

So, all of that leads us back to Trinity Sunday. We might not be able to put words to how the Trinity works or what it means for the Holy Spirit to be at work in our lives, but we do know what it means to be surrounded by the love of the trinitarian God. The Spirit of God who dwells in and among us empowers us to call on God as Parent and assures us that we are children of God and joint heirs with Christ. Parent, Son, and Spirit all work together for the purpose of claiming us as God’s children.

The next lyric in Matt’s song following “love is real, and we can prove it” is quite possibly the most trinitarian thing that you will hear all day. He says, “you are not alone.” The good news about being adopted as God’s children is that we are constantly surrounded by a cloud of witnesses and we have an incredible example of how to be in relationship with one another. Creator, son, and spirit are all in a constant dance of love. There is mutual giving and receiving, a harmonious sharing of love, honor, joy, respect, and living in an eternal relationship of self-giving.

We are invited into this divine dance and if we accept this invitation, we feel immersed in it. Fully adopted and gathered in, receiving everything that Christ does. Our dance together in God allows us to bring compassion to this wounded world. We not only learn to love God and to love one another, but together we make a difference in this world, doing things that we could never imagine on our own. If we can shed our fears and recognize that we are never alone in this journey, we can step into a life of freedom, love, beauty, and holiness. May it be so. Amen.