

## **Living in the Community of Creation**

### **Colossians 3:12-17    John 16:12-15**

The next reading is from John's gospel. It's from the section of John that's called the Thursday night discourse (John 14-17). It's also been called Jesus' farewell discourse, because it's Maundy Thursday, and Jesus has just celebrated the Passover with his disciples, which will be his last earthly evening with them.

And now he gives them a farewell speech, his final words of encouragement and blessing. There are many gems in this final discourse, which contain some of peoples' favorite Bible passages. Here are a few examples so you get a feel for the entire discourse, before I read our passage from chapter 16:

"Do not let your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my father's house are many rooms; I go to prepare a place for you;" and "The advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of everything I have said to you. Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you; I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid;" and "I am the vine; you are the branches; abide in me, as I abide in you;" and "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for one's friends... you are my friends;" and many more. Beautiful promises! This passage comes toward the end of that discourse...

## John 16:12-15

12 'I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. <sup>13</sup>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. <sup>14</sup>He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. <sup>15</sup>All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

This is the word of the Lord.

Let's talk about the trinity! I am not going to bore you with attempts to explain the trinity, so we can fully wrap our minds around the concept of one God in three persons, or three persons who comprise one God, of the same substance, and all that. Attempts have been made, and they all fall short.

For example, the trinity is like an egg—it's one egg, but with three parts: the yolk, the egg white, and the shell. Or, the trinity is like H<sub>2</sub>O, which can be found in different forms like liquid water, mist/fog, and ice. Same substance, three forms. The analogies all break down at some point, because the trinity isn't something to be explained, but someone(s) to be experienced and appreciated.

It's like the little girl's reply in a Sunday school class once, when the teacher asked, "What do you think about God?" And she said, God isn't a think. God is a feel." That's a pretty good answer, and what she was saying, in a child-like way, is that God is meant to be known and experienced.

By all means use your brains, and let your mind go to work for appropriate amounts of useful time to figure out what is necessary. But eventually we need to get out of our heads because we tend to think too much, and it can actually get in the way of the discovery of who God is, and who *we are* in God, and Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. This is why Scripture tells us that God dwells in our *hearts*. Not in our minds. Because we can think our way out of potentially good things; and we can think our way *into*... trouble, or needless arguments—what the apostle Paul wonderfully calls “wrangling.” Defined in the dictionary as engagement in long, complicated arguments. And there have been some long, complicated arguments about the trinity over the centuries!

But the early church leaders developed the idea, or doctrine, of the trinity for the sake of increasing faith, and for inviting people into the great friendship, blessing, and community of the godhead. More about this in a moment.

The doctrine of the trinity arose out of early Christian reflection on the witness of scripture, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. For his followers, encountering Jesus was somehow encountering God directly — and at the same time, Jesus spoke of God as both distinct from him (as when he prayed to God, or spoke of God as the One who sent him) and yet nevertheless “one” with him. There was both a “two-ness” and a “oneness” in play.

And along with that, early disciples experienced encounters with the *Spirit* as encounters with God directly, and with the risen Christ directly—and at the same time, Jesus spoke of the Spirit as a guiding presence distinct both from him and from the God the Father, who was to send the Spirit, as we heard.

And so arose, over time, the church's doctrine of the trinity, the idea that God is both three and one. Not three Gods — for that would miss God's oneness. And not merely One — for that would miss God's threeness, and wouldn't do justice to the sense of encountering God in Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

In a nutshell, it's a mystery. Receive it as such, and be blessed by the presence and blessing of God's fulness as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

Which leads us to this passage from John. There are 2 things I'd like to glean from this reading:

1. First, briefly, Jesus refers to the Spirit here as the "Spirit of truth."

There are other names and images given for the Spirit (counselor, comforter, advocate, helper). These all sound pretty good by the way, don't they? Like this is someone you would want on your side, or as a friend.

Here, Jesus refers to the Spirit as the *Spirit of truth*. This signifies to the disciples that the Spirit will now be your teacher and guide—in a way replacing Jesus as their guide and teacher. Earlier in his farewell discourse, as we heard,

Jesus told them that the Spirit would remind them of everything he taught them.

And now, he says, with the Spirit there will be even more. Can't tell you what it is right now, he said, but hang in there. The Spirit of truth will reveal it.

A question naturally arises here: what is truth? Or, "*the*" truth? It's a natural question to ask, especially when reading John's gospel because John is obsessed with this word. Or, he is obsessed with Jesus' use of it. It appears almost 30 times in John's gospel...

From the very beginning, chapter 1, we hear that wonderful Christmas passage that "the word became flesh and dwelt among us; and we beheld his glory... full of grace and... truth." In the Thursday night discourse Jesus said, "I am the way, *the truth* and the life." And before that, he said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth will make you free."

So, what is truth—the truth that is so often spoken of in John? My reply: Great question! It's the same question that Pontius Pilate asked Jesus (as recorded in John's gospel, again) when Jesus told him that he had come to testify to the truth. Pilate replies (and probably speaks for many people) when he asks, "What is truth?" Which Jesus doesn't answer, btw, for some reason.

It's a question a lot of people are asking today, with so much blatantly false information and AI generated images and videos being put forth. What is truth anymore? That's an important question that needs to be addressed.

But to answer the question of truth in a basic way, as it relates to Jesus' use of it, particularly in speaking about the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth, I have come to understand and experience this as Jesus and the Spirit revealing to the world the truth about *who God is*, and the truth about *who we are*. Namely, that God is love. Throughout the gospels, Jesus affirms that God isn't mad at the world. Rather, he affirms that God loves the world. Hence, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave Jesus." That's one truth. A huge, important one.

And the truth about us is that we are unconditionally loved, no matter who we are, where we've been, what we've done. And the invitation is to live into that truth—the truth of our belovedness, in light of God's great desire to love.

One of my long-time friends pastors a church that has this as its mission statement: "Showing the world the real Jesus." In other words, the true Jesus. Because there are a lot of misconceptions out there about who Jesus is, or who God is. A lot of false images and false narratives. Like, God is mad at the world and Jesus came to protect us (save us) from angry dad. No! Jesus came to reveal the truth that our Father loves us and the world, and that we are beloved.

So, the Spirit of truth will continue to reveal that to us, and it is our invitation to be people who reflect that truth to the world—that God is love, and that people are beloved of God. That’s why Jesus said, “They’ll know you are my followers by the love you have.” Because we know the truth; the truth of that love.

2. The second thing to glean from this passage is Jesus’ description of the relational, cooperative nature of the trinity.

Jesus’ language in in this passage is a challenge to unpack, as Jesus describes what the Spirit will do, taking what is Jesus’s, which he says is also God’s. But if we put this in colloquial terms, Jesus is simply saying: We get along with each other. We cooperate with each other. We listen to each other. We share what we have with each other... for your sakes. For all y’all’s benefit.

There is something deeply generative and life-giving about the relationship between God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. They are distinct, yet, they also, together, generate something more. More life, more guidance, more relationality and interconnectedness.

This takes us back all the way to Genesis 1, when God creates, and in doing so speaks in the plural: “Let *us* make humankind in *our* image, according to *our* likeness.” We can safely assume that the “us” was present before humanity came

on the scene. Especially because the second verse of the Bible, in Genesis, says that the Spirit of God hovered over the formlessness of the earth.

So, there is a cooperation and a generative nature to the trinity. This is so important, and, it's so easy to miss. This is where relationship begins. With the triune God, all present *at* creation and *in* the created order.

God created the world and the universe with relationship as the building block. And it is generative and life-giving.

Think of it, the DNA of the world and the universe is relationship. The building blocks of protons, neutrons, electrons form in relationship to each other to make atoms. And atoms combine with other atoms to make... stuff. And there is inherent unity and relationality in our earth's ecosystem—it's a delicate balance. It was out of love (the truth) that God created the physical world with an inherent relational unity. This is true of every part and piece of earth, and it's also true in the outer universe. God has mirrored relationship in the very structure of the universe: planets in relationship to one another, galaxies in relationship. And, to bring it back home, people in relationship.

And it begins in the Godhead, in a triune God, this mystery of three persons in community and cooperation with one another. *Not in hierarchy*, but in community and cooperation, for the sake of the world.



We in the western protestant church have become so individualized that we have dissected the trinity into quite separate individuals, each of whom we think appear and disappear at times and work separately from each other with different functions. Yet if there is one thing the creation account tells us, and that Jesus is telling us (especially in John's gospel) it's that the trinity is always present, and always works together, cooperatively and generatively.

There is an ancient, 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century word that the early church used to describe this: perichoresis: peri=around, like in "perimeter;" and choresis=make room, or give way; it's where we get the word "choreography"—movement, around one another. So perichoresis came to be understood by the early church as "the divine dance." Divine choreography! The Godhead making room for one another—in and around each other. This eternal relationship of self-giving, one to the other, and inviting the world into this movement.

That's part of the truth: We are invited into this! A divine dance of self-giving, generative, relationality.

I'd like to remind us of Andrei Rublev's 14<sup>th</sup> century Russian icon of the Trinity (show on screen). There is a lot going on here with the symbols and colors and the members of the trinity sitting around a table with a chalice in the center. We could take a fair amount of time to discuss the detail and symbolism, but I

simply want us again to notice the little rectangle on the front of the table. It's an odd detail and doesn't really fit. On the original it wasn't painted on; it had some kind of adhesive stuck to it. We're not 100% sure why it's there, but iconographers who study such things believe that when Rublev created this painting, he attached a mirror there, so as you approached the painting, hung at eye level, you saw... yourself... invited in, being drawn in, and part of, this divine community. Isn't that beautiful? We are invited to be part of the perichoresis. The divine choreography, the dance of community and communion. And relationship, and self-giving.

And btw, when Rublev painted this icon in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Russia was experiencing intense power struggles among various internal factions, much of their struggle having to do with how to deal with the Mongol empire, which controlled much of the region at that time. Long story short, the power struggles and skirmishes eventually resulted in the consolidation of power in Moscow. Which included, moving the seat of authority for the Russian Orthodox church to Moscow. The end result was a very controlling hierarchy of leadership and power, which included control over the Russian Orthodox Church.

So, Rublev painted this icon, partly as protest (because power should be shared and distributed, not centralized and made into a hierarchy), but he

painted it, mostly as an invitation to unity, and cooperation, because of the inherent unity and cooperation between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. (slide off)

What all of this tells us, is that all of the gracious activity of the Godhead, by nature, is working toward unity and community—toward relationship and generative self-giving. That's why the DNA of the Kingdom of God is reconciliation, healing, love, forgiveness. *Disunity* and division are, we might say, the anti-matter of the Kingdom. They go against the divine dance and the inherent interconnectedness of everything in the created order.

I mentioned that we, in the west, have individualized the trinity. We have not only individualized the trinity, we have individualized our *humanity* so much, and have become so tribalized and separate, that we've lost a sense of humankind, as a whole, being created in the image of the triune God, together. We all bear the image of God. No one individual bears the full image of God—we, together, bear the image in our common humanity—all of our gifts and skills, our personalities, our ethnicities, all of it, together, reflects the image of God. So... we need each other!

And the beauty of the church, at its best, is when the church—or churches, together—become a place of celebrating and honoring a common humanity; people in relationship with the triune God, and with one another, that exhibits

our inherent unity and cooperation, and a generativeness, which naturally serves others, and invites others in. So that *everyone* can thrive.

So here is what the church can do, and what the church does best: we offer community. That word, community, is getting used a lot these days—for good reason because there is a need and a hunger for it—but when words get overused, they can lose their meaning, so we may want to find other ways to say this... that the church can offer a sense of belonging, relationship, support, a safe place to be, and be with others, for mutual thriving.

This is why Paul encourages one-anothering so often in his letters (as we heard in the Colossians 3 reading)—love *one another*, bear with *one another*, support *one another*, forgive *one another*, show kindness and compassion to *one another*. It's so needed. We need it, and those around us need it.

This doesn't mean it's all rainbows and unicorns and utopia. One-anothering can be messy. Relationships aren't easy. Trying to be unified and cooperate and listen and be one in the Spirit takes effort. But in the big picture of the Kingdom of God, and because of who God is... we make the effort.

Jesus began his Thursday night discourse, following the washing of the disciples' feet, with these words: "The world will know that you are my followers by your love." He ended that discourse with a prayer, where he prays, in part: "I

*ask not only on behalf of these (his present disciples) but also on behalf of those who believe in me through them (that's us!), that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us... The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*

(John 17:20-23) That's a lot of one-anothering going on in that prayer!

May Jesus' prayer be fulfilled among his followers, here, and everywhere!

We Are One in the spirit