

Homily – The Flow That Is God

Rob Keim

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On Friday afternoon I stood at the intersection of Grand and Oak Park along with about two hundred others. I held a sign that said “You are Beautiful”, “Black Lives Matter”, and “Brown Lives Matter.” As cars drove by we shouted and waved, and it was a joy to come together to rise above the numbness and make a stand. About an hour into the rally, I noticed that the police had closed down both Grand Avenue and Oak Park. Someone had done some good organizing. And, with their closure we converged to center of the intersection of these busy streets. We knelt to pray for about nine minutes, the same amount of time that it took for George Floyd to be murdered in Minneapolis Saint Paul.

Then, following a police escort we marched down Grand Avenue. I did not stay for the entire march but walked back to my car that was parked at our St. Barnabas Thrift Shop. And, to get to my car I had to walk through a line of heavily armed local police officers and even more heavily armed riot police. Though I had a bit of trepidation, I knew I was white, I was wearing a clergy collar, and there were only two of us walking peacefully through the line. It was an example of the white privilege that surrounds me and keeps most of us here today in our place of comfort.

As a white person I have a lot of advantages that a person of color does not have. We often think of those advantages as being in the past. We know that Jim Crow laws and redlining in real estate gave advantages to our parents and grandparents. But, these laws from fifty and a hundred years ago still have a cascading negative effect on our black and brown brothers and sisters. And, today, we know that black men are incarcerated at a rate that is five times higher than white men. This is not because crime rates are higher in the black community, but it is because of inherent bias with our police, our court system, and our laws. The absurdly high number in prison is not because black men have made bad choices and white men make good choices. And, it is certainly not because black people are bad and white people are good.

My family and I benefit from the white privilege that is built into many parts of our society. Not only is this disrespectful of people of color, but it keeps all of us from living into the potential that God has built into us. We are not living into the lives that God intends for us. We are stunted in our growth and in our love.

Now, today we have our annual celebration of the Trinity – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Or, the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier of Life. This is that three in one things with God.” These three intimate loving relationships that never stop flowing with love are the three persons of the Trinity. The Father is the Father but he

is also the Son and the Spirit. There is both unity and diversity in our image of the Trinity.

And, if we are to believe the Scriptures, then we can see that the Trinity is a circle dance of flow, communion, and relationship. The very nature of God is a constant flow and self-emptying of one into another. And, as our reading from Genesis shows us this flow is the template for everything created. Every created thing is the self-emptying of God.

God is constantly outpouring. Like a waterwheel of Divine love, the Father empties all into the Son. The Son receives and empties all of himself into the Spirit. The Spirit receives and empties all of herself into the Father. The Father receives and the cycle continues. That is the pattern of reality and of creation itself.

Now, many of us grew up with the notion of a static God at the top of a pyramid-shaped universe with all else beneath. Most Christian art and church design reflects this pyramidal worldview, which shows what little influence the concept of Trinity has had had in our history.

Today, I want to boldly proclaim, that we must begin with the Trinity if we are to rebuild Christianity from the bottom up. The Trinity is absolutely foundational to Christianity because it reveals the heart of the nature of God. And yet, as the Roman Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, pointed out, the concept of the Trinity has made almost no difference in the lives of the vast majority of Christians. This sad fact either means the Trinity is not true or that we just have not understood it.

I can tell you that in my own spiritual journey, I believe the concept of the Trinity is true, but we must move from dogma and doctrine to a level of experience. We must experience God as a flow and as a dance.

Now, have you ever noticed that you become the God you worship? In other words, your image of God creates you. If your image of God is of a punishing god, then that is also who you are yourself. If your image of God is of a flowing outpouring of love, then that is also who you are yourself.

This should be of concern to us, for if we get the image of God wrong, everything else that builds on it is going to be rather inadequate. That might seem like an overstatement, but let's recognize how that's been true in Western Christianity in particular. We have traditionally received God as an old, white guy in a way that denies the holiness of women and people of color. And that view of God continues to color our laws and the way that many do church. Instead, we need to use the flowing

and dancing nature of our Triune God to see that God is communal, diverse, and dynamic. Let's look at these three characteristics of God in more depth.

First, God is communal. It's one thing to say that God values community. Or, that God thinks community is good for us. It's altogether another thing to say that God is communal. Our God is relationship, intimacy, connection, and communion.

Evidence of this divine characteristic runs all through the Scriptures. When God the Son is baptized, God the Spirit descends in the form of a dove, and God the Father parts the heavens to speak with delight and affirmation. And, at another time it is the Spirit of God which drives the Son of God into the wilderness, for a time of testing and preparation. And, in the Garden of Gethsemane, the Son of God cries out to God the Father for help and solace. And, it is God the Father who raises the crucified Son and vindicates his death through resurrection. Throughout the Gospel story, the Three exist intertwined with one another.

So, if God is interactive at God's very heart — if Three is the deepest nature of the One — then what are we doing when we human beings isolate ourselves from each other? As Americans we value independence and autonomy over companionship and mutuality. To our shame, we prioritize our individual rights over our care and concern for the most vulnerable among us.

If the Trinity really is more than a bit of dusty doctrine that the early Church fought over, then we dare not take lightly the life-changing power of the communal. God is Relationship, and it is in relationship — with God, others and self that we experience and embody God's nature.

Second, God is diverse. If God exists in three persons, then each person has his (or her) own way of embodying and expressing goodness, beauty, love, and righteousness. In his book, "The Divine Dance," Franciscan spiritual teacher, Richard Rohr writes that, "the Trinity affirms that there is an intrinsic plurality to goodness. "Goodness isn't sameness." He writes, "goodness, to be goodness, needs contrast and tension, not perfect uniformity." And, if God can incarnate goodness through contrast and tension, then it's worth asking why we can't do the same? Why do we fear difference so much when difference lies at the very heart of God's nature?"

Given the racial divisions tearing the United States apart at this very moment, I can't imagine a more relevant characteristic to ponder than God's innate diversity. As churches, communities, and countries, we will not survive unless we learn how to live gracefully and peaceably with difference. We will not heal unless we're honest about our fears, penitent about our histories, and unrelenting in our longing for God's diverse nature to be realized among us in its fullness.

Third, God is dynamic. If God is triune, then God does not exist in monolithic stasis. Rather, God's self is fluid. As I said earlier, God moves. We worship a God who is always on the move, always spilling over, always organic, always a surprise. God is constantly at work in our world and continues to reveal new and wonderful things to us. While God may be immutable, what God shows us about God is always changing.

And, I think it matters because as human beings we are prone to rigidity and stasis. We don't like change, and we are often reluctant to embrace what is new, what is unfamiliar, what is uncomfortable. But if God's nature is flow and movement and dance, then we need to find the courage to enter into that same flow, movement, and dance. We must be willing to evolve. And, what better way to evolve than to finally give up our white privilege.

As followers of Jesus we believe that we are made in the image of God. We have a divine spark in each and every one of us. When we receive God as communal, diverse, and dynamic then we see that it is in the nature of our being to be that way as well. We need to emphasize virtues and ways of being together in society that lift up the communal, diverse and dynamic natures of ourselves. We need to actively discard our white privilege.

Now, an African American college buddy of mine gave me the following suggestions. Ron has been the saxophone player in the Saturday Night Live band for twenty years. If you watch the show, you can see a tall guy standing in the back each week playing the sax. I think these suggestions are a good way for us to reflect the Triune nature of our God. Ron sent me this quote from Viola Davis.

Some are posting on social media.

Some are protesting in the streets.

Some are donating silently.

Some are educating themselves.

Some are having tough conversations with friends and family.

A revolution has many lanes. Be kind to yourself and to others who are traveling in the same direction. And, keep your foot on the gas.

Parts of this sermon are taken from or based on an essay by Debie Thomas at journeywithjesus.net.