



Even God is a Community

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church
Trinity Sunday, June 7, 2020*

In the name of the Triune God, who calls each one of us Beloved. **Amen.**

St. John's has a long-standing relationship with Liberty Community Church, which is a predominantly African American church in North Minneapolis. Their primary mission is The Healing Space, which provides support and healing to those who have experienced sex trafficking. Last Saturday, May 30, their Pastor Alika Galloway called me to say that she had gotten intel that white supremacists were intending to burn down black churches in Minneapolis. She asked if a group from St. John's could come right away to help them board up their church to protect it. Because I was already on my way to attend a march, as a clergy person, to protest the violence and racism in our society of which I am complicit, I called Steve Schewe who promptly convened a group from St. John's, and I and the group showed up at 4pm to help. These good people knew the risks of convening as a group during a pandemic. But they wore masks and offered their help anyway.

Pastor Alike said she thought it was no coincidence that St. John's and Liberty Church convened the weekend of Pentecost, when the Spirit brought the whole church together and lit it on fire. Today is another of great feast of the church, which is Trinity Sunday. It's the day we celebrate our understanding of God as Triune: Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit. During a time of global pandemic and racial crisis, you might ask what possible relevance the doctrine of the Trinity has for us. And my answer is that it is perhaps the most important thing we could focus on right now. Let me explain why.

We say that all people are made in the image of God. But how we understand that God matters very much. If God is a slightly stern disapproving white man with a long beard, that has real implications for who we are and for who belongs or doesn't. If God is an impersonal unconscious force, that also has implications for how we worship and how we live. But in Christian tradition we say that God is three very different persons involved in an endless dance with each other and with the world. Even God is a community. In fact I'd say that the Triune God is the reality of reconciled diversity that pervades all of creation.

I think that means that we are made for interdependence across lines of difference.

It means that the DNA of reality is relational.

It means that we all belong together. As God said in the very beginning of creation, in Genesis 2, “It is not good for the man to be alone.”

I’ve recently said that I thought if Christian faith could be summed up in one single word—as perhaps enlightenment might be for Buddhists or liberation might be for yogis—that word for Christians would be reconciliation. Reconciliation with God, neighbors, and ourselves. In our country, this must include racial reconciliation. But as someone from St. John’s rightly pointed out to me, reconciliation implies a prior healed relationship that one could return to, and in the U.S. there has never been a good relationship like that between black and white people. Our relationship began in monstrous violence with the blessing of the church and has continued with violence and prejudice in resilient and ever changing forms to the current day. We must not and cannot allow this to continue. But what is it that will help us, if there was never a whole and good relationship to begin with?

I believe that the very being and presence of God in Christ in the power of the Spirit is what will help us who are followers of Jesus. Before there was the political and cultural invention of race; and before there was sin, and violence, and empire; there is the original fact of who we are, which is people made for interdependence with each other in the image of a triune God. Our scriptures tell us that in the very beginning, God created all people and called us good, no matter how very much we have distorted and violated that goodness.

In our baptisms, which Jesus refers to in today's gospel text, here are some of the promises that we make:

Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord? I will, with God's help.

Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? I will, with God's help.

Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being? I will, with God's help.

In the name of the Triune God whose own being is a Beloved Community, and in whose image we are made, I call us at St. John's to a time of repentance and returning to God. The culture of white supremacy is not limited to those on the far right or in the KKK who consciously and explicitly believe that white people are superior. It is implicit in nearly all of our systems and symbols and in our subconscious and unconscious assumptions. These assumptions and culture are contrary to the very being of the triune God.

It's absolutely true that we need to take practical and swift action to address the wrongs that have been done and to intervene for those who are in danger of harm. But what I believe is most fundamentally needed is to undergo the real conversion of life that will keep us committed to healing for the long haul even if we never see results, because this is

what it means to follow Jesus. As our Bishop Curry says, we've got to change hearts right now. How will we do this?

In answer, I will say that I see the risen Christ already operating, healing, loving, connecting people, even when the word Christian isn't being used at all. The immediate response of St. John's folks to Liberty Church is just a drop in the overwhelming wave of love and generosity being poured out in Minneapolis. For example, if you go to the site at 38th street and Chicago where George Floyd was killed, you will see an incredible and extraordinary thing. Flowers, art, chalk drawings and expressions of love and lament literally cover the street and the buildings. There are tables of food, water, diapers, that people have spontaneously arranged to be donated to anyone in need. The formerly abandoned Sheraton Hotel in Minneapolis has been commandeered by neighbors who are now operating that hotel, free of charge, for those who are homeless. Last week Sanford Middle School, a short distance from the 3rd Precinct in Minneapolis, put out a desperate request for grocery bags for their kids who have an immediate need for food. They asked for 85 bags of food. They got more than 20,000, bags that stretched on the sidewalks for four blocks. All over the world there are people peacefully protesting the racism and violence in Minnesota and in the United States, and as our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry said, these protests are truly multicultural—even more so than the protests of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. There is much violence, but there is also life and Beloved Community and incredible

abundance and generosity being poured out everywhere. My friends, some of us from the noonday prayer service this week were saying that it felt like we were seeing scripture enacted in front of our eyes. The 85 bags of food wanted that became 20,000 bags in one day showed us five loaves and two fishes being multiplied into food for 5,000 hungry people. At ground zero, where the destruction is, there is also the presence of Christ leading and the Spirit's outpouring of love and community. This is a Pentecost of love amidst the violence, healing amidst the hate.

Last week was the birthday of the church, and it is time to let her die and rise again, to be born again, with Christ, for the sake of love. I believe that the Spirit has given us all that we need to begin the long road of healing and reparation. Let us use the incredible outpouring of energy in Minneapolis to drive us to repentance and to at last truly commit ourselves as disciples of Jesus' Way of Love. In a few weeks, we will celebrate the Nativity of St. John the Baptist, our namesake, who called all the world to renewal and repentance. On that day, we will launch an initiative to do a four-week deep dive as an entire community to make the steps of turning, learning, praying, blessing and going to the places of the world's pain where Jesus already is—in the name of love.

In the meantime, as we begin our time of confession, repentance and lament for the sake of love, I'd like to share something I've found very helpful, which I also shared in my rector's reflection this week. There is a Catholic priest from Uganda, Emmanuel Katongole, who was active in

reconciliation efforts after the Rwandan genocide. He said that reconciliation requires the discipline of lament—of staying with the anguish of what has been without rushing too quickly to fix things. In order to lament, we need to unlearn speed, distance, and innocence. We need to avoid the temptation of speed: the superficial attempts to do quick things that by themselves do not address the pain and damage that has been done. We need to unlearn distance, which means that violence and reconciliation are like real estate: they are about location, location, location. We need to get close up to ground zero, to the particular pain of racism in Minneapolis, to how it has impacted real people like George Floyd whose name and face and murder I will never forget. And we need to let go of the illusion that this violence does not touch us personally, that we can stand and be untouched by it. We also need to unlearn innocence, which means allowing ourselves to face the horror of the white silence and complicity in a racism that has done such outrageous damage to us all but from which those of us who are white have also benefitted in countless ways.

We can have the courage to do these things because we follow the crucified and risen Christ who has shown us that pain and violence and sin do not have the last word. The Way of Jesus has always flourished most among the poor and the marginalized and in times of struggle and challenge. As we do the work of repenting the sins of empire and colonialism and racism, we will discover that scripture is coming alive before our eyes; the ink is hardly even dry on the page. Our God, the Triune God, is here. The illusion that we are separate from

each other is a lie that has perpetuated damage beyond calculation, but the Triune God is still the DNA of reality, of all that exists, and because of this we can have hope that the goodness of creation can be restored. Trinity Sunday means simply, that we belong together, caught up into the embrace of God who loves and heals and liberates. May it be so. Amen.