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Trinity Sunday

“Awkward Dancers”

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Matthew 28:16-20

As Presbyterians gathered yesterday from all over the country and beyond at our General Assembly in Detroit, they began as we should always begin: with worship. The GA worship services are like no other – held in the huge convention hall where the rest of the week’s business will take place, large and elaborate and touching all five senses. I watched the live stream online, along with about a thousand others, joining the huge crowd there in person, and many more praying for them from afar.

And because we are Presbyterian, the service began with a time of confession. Three leaders gathered around an immense glass baptismal font in the center of the worship space, and took turns leading a prayer that remembered the promises of baptism: they reminded us of the vows we took, or our parents took for us – claiming Jesus Christ as lord and savior, relying on God’s help to turn away from evil things and toward the leading of the Spirit. And, just as important, the leaders reminded us of the promises made to each of us in our own baptism – incorporating us each into the work of Christ in the world, chosen, called, and loved.

We have not lived up to this calling, the prayer reminded us, but still we are beloved and still we are chosen for the work that needs to be done. Each of those commissioners gathered – pastors and laypeople, Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders like some of us, representing congregations like ours across the world – each of them has been commissioned to the particular work of following God’s calling in our denominational business, and each of them has been given all the tools to do so, simply by virtue of their baptism.

It is a powerful reminder, for them and for each of us, particularly this week when we celebrate Trinity Sunday. We are baptized in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and in that baptism we are claimed and called into a reality that is infinitely larger than anything we could manage on our own.

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I know many preachers have sort of a love-hate relationship with Trinity Sunday – it’s a day to celebrate a complicated theological doctrine, and that is hard to wrap words around. Often I’m not sure that most Christians really understand what we mean when we talk about the trinity. (What do we mean, God is three in one? How does that work?) In one sense that’s a shame, but really I think it makes perfect sense – when we get down to it, the concept of the trinity is nothing more than a metaphorical attempt to capture the mysterious ways we experience God working in our world.

It's the sort of concept where the more precise or scientific we attempt to be, the more we miss the mark; although that hasn't stopped centuries of theologians from trying to do just that. And so we've got these passionate historical debates about the particular moment when God became present in Christ, for example, or the technical function of the Spirit in that relationship, and I have to admit that even though I love some obscure theological debates, these just make my eyes glaze over. What difference could it possibly make if we call God consubstantial or hypostatic or perichoretic? What does that have to do with our lives here and now??

Somehow, this is one of those moments when poetry and metaphor seem to capture a deeper truth than simple fact. The whole being of God is a little bit much to wrap our heads around! To paraphrase John F. Kennedy: "When power leads us toward arrogance, poetry reminds us of our limitations. When power narrows the area of our concern, poetry reminds us of the richness and diversity of our existence. When power corrupts, poetry cleanses."

When we turn to metaphor, we can describe the Trinity in terms like a tree – roots, trunk, and branches of the same organism – or like water, ice, and steam; the same substance with different form and function. Or we can choose words that describe the ways we experience God: Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer; Lover, Beloved, and the Love that unites them; Speaker, Word, and Truth.

If we can let go of the need to micromanage and understand precisely the way God functions – which is the height of arrogance, isn't it? – we can see in this image of three persons in one being, each one part of the others and yet each distinct, a perfect relationship of love and mutuality.

One favorite image is of a dance: three separate people, connected and aware, each one spinning around the others in their own way, yet making room for the others and supporting them each in turn. It's a dance of respect and complexity, the dancers together making a pattern infinitely more detailed and beautiful than they could on their own. Whether it's precisely choreographed or beautifully improvised, it's hard for our eyes to tell; and maybe what seems like randomness is just so complex that we can't wrap our minds around the pattern.

It's a relationship the likes of which we're never going to be able to match, but yet this is the relationship into which we are baptized – this dynamic love is the origin from which all life springs, and it's a pattern we can live in and strive after. It's perfectly fitting, in that way, for a prayer of confession to be led from around a giant baptismal font. We are baptized in the name not just of God the Creator, or of Jesus, or of the Spirit, but of all three in one. We are baptized into the whole dynamic being of God, and into that interrelationship which we might look up to but will never quite reach.

We are called, in this General Assembly week and in all of our lives together, to strive ever closer to the ways of God, knowing that we will never quite make it but trying anyway. We see the intricate dance of God around and among us, and we are invited to step in. As the movements sweep around us, we are sometimes afraid to join in, because we don't know this dance, we can't keep up, we don't quite have the rhythm down – but God reaches out a hand to us anyway. We will never dance as well as God does, but God knows that.

The General Assembly will consider some controversial topics this week. They will vote on divestment from three companies that profit from the occupation of Israel and the oppression of Palestinian people; they will vote on a change in the definition of marriage from “between one man and one woman” to “between two people”; and changes to the format and rules for General Assembly gatherings themselves, among many other issues. Emotions will probably run high, and it is almost certain that no one will be completely satisfied with every decision that comes out of the assembly.

We are all in this together, and even though each commissioner will be doing their best to follow what they believe Christ is calling them to do, we are human and we will get things wrong. Or we will get things right, and that rightness might be hard to swallow. Or more likely, we will strive for what is right, and we will stumble over our feet because even though God leads us in this dance of being people together, we do not dance quite as well with one another as God does with Godself.

But we have been baptized into the whole Trinity of God’s being in the world. And whatever fancy theological words you want to use to try and describe that, the point is this: God exists around us, beside us, and within us in more ways than we will ever be able to exactly pin down. And each of those are for us and among us in different ways at different times, even (or especially) when we falter and do not live up to God’s calling for us.

When we are lost or stumbling, God is a strong guiding hand. When we are blustery and arrogant, God is the quiet whisper urging us to sit and listen. When we are afraid, God is Comforter; when we are guilty, God is Redeemer; when we think we’ve got it all figured out, God is the eternal Creator who reminds us exactly who we are and whose we are.

It is a beautiful and mysterious dance swirling around us, and as we step on one another’s toes and clap on the wrong beats, we are still beloved by our God, and we are still called out onto the dance floor again and again, dancing to the music of all creation.