

Sermon Notes May 30.21 Trinity Sunday Sermon: three things the Church community is not.

Pray: Lord Jesus, give us a word from your word. Amen.

Where do we find hope after 15 months of pandemic? If you don't golf, then what? What is the Trinity? Was Jesus there in the beginning with God or did he just show up in Matthew's Gospel in the New Testament? Where IS our community when we've been apart so long?

I want to ask you to do something: if you have missed the love and friendship of church, raise your hand. If you wish you knew that kind of love and friendship but have yet to find it, raise your hand.

Ok, hands down. Thank you. I want to encourage you, that the key teaching of the Christian faith, the Trinity, centres on the very notion of community, a concept desperately needed by many and one we often taken for granted.

Let's explore the Trinity briefly, then we'll talk about three things the Church community is not.

Every year on the Sunday after Pentecost for hundreds of years, Christians take up the doctrine of the Trinity. Inferred in Scripture rather than explicitly stated, God's three-in-one nature poses significant challenges. Adults understandably are confused by the fuzzy math of trinitarian theology and the dearth of discussion about it the rest of the year, and often hang on every word of the Children's Video.

But a better way is to remind ourselves that the doctrine of the Trinity is meant *not only* to tell us the truth about God but to *invite us* to live that truth — a truth revealed not in abstract theory but in the flesh and blood, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. As Rowan Williams puts it: *"Nothing is known of God the Trinity that does not come through the Word incarnate . . . Jesus is what we see in history of an infinite identity and reality, God the Word, the One who is next to the Father's heart.* (Rowan Williams, *The Dwelling of the Light: Praying with Icons of Christ*, Eerdmans 2003)

So Jesus WAS there in the beginning with the Father. Jesus said to the Pharisees, Before Abraham was born, I am! (John 8:58). And to Philip he says, "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father (John 14:9). Paul writes to the Colossians that Christ is the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation. For by him all things were created and have their being on earth, visible and invisible (Col 2:15). In Hebrews we read, "In these last days, God has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things and through whom he made the universe." (Heb 1:2)

In the bafflement we witness on the lips of Isaiah and Nicodemus, we hear our own limitations at comprehending God. In Isaiah, the heavenly seraphim have few words but make them into a song. In Hebrew, 'holy' means unique, different, other, beyond comparison – three times, says the Bishop Heber hymn # 1 in Common Praise, Holy, Holy, Holy. The whole scene is like a music video where you can almost feel the swoosh of angels' wings and smell the charcoal fire as the very temple itself shakes with the power of their song.

Like the wise men who followed the star to Bethlehem, one night wise Nicodemus asks Jesus, whose star is on the rise, about the way of eternal life. Jesus tells Nicodemus that the only way is to squeeze through the narrowest birth canal and start over, stripped of everything, like a newborn. To individuals like Nicodemus that sounds impossible, humanly speaking. It sounds like dying. Indeed, it is. Believing is as much surrender to something infinitely greater than us, as it is a choice.

As Jesus teaches, in the waters of baptism we die with the Son and, when the Spirit breathes new life into us, we become children of the Father. We have been given a great gift. We may be at home alone but we are spiritually, sacramentally, forever linked to one another. We ARE church. We ARE community, just as Jesus knew community in his relationship of Father and Spirit, in Him the Son, we awaken to the fact that that community lives in us, or more accurately, we live in Him. So even while we are scattered and watching at home, Trinity is community of spirit that unites us, that has nothing to do with a building and everything to do with God on a mission in our hearts and hands.

Now here are Three things that the church community is not:

The Church

community is not all the same. Given my druthers, I might well choose a church community that is just like me, people who have a post-secondary education, people that cheer for the same teams, wears similar clothes, drive similar cars, aspire to the same lifestyle. Yet after a short time we would get bored with each another, at least I would.

Henri Nouwen defines community as “the place where the person you least want to live with always lives.” Often, we surround ourselves with the people we most want to live with, which forms a club or a clique, not a community.

The church was the first institution in history to bring together on equal footing Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slaves and free. The apostle Paul waxed eloquent on this ‘mystery, which for ages was kept hidden in God.’ By forming a community out of diverse members, Paul said, we have the opportunity to capture the attention of the world and even the supernatural world beyond (Eph 3:9-10).

In some ways the church has failed in this assignment, erecting barriers of various kinds to keep people out. Still, when we look around at Christ Church, the kind of church that Jesus is creating brings together people from all around the world, generations brought together like infants held at their mother’s breasts, children who squirm and giggle at the wrong times, youth with challenges and questions and hopes, responsible adults who know how to act appropriately, most of the time, wheel chairs, walkers, oxygen tanks, tattoos, and members older and younger who may drift off to sleep if the preacher drones on too long.

The church is a community, a community of the forever Trinity, that is Not all the same, that’s worth celebrating! The community Jesus got started with disciples as diverse as an ex-prostitute, ex-tax collector, fishermen, a zealot, two sons of thunder and the church community Jesus continues today. I like that. I find that hopeful.

Second thing the Church community is not: We are not all so put together or perfect. Maybe it appears Church people have it together and that can send the wrong message.

One of the strengths of Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous or Celebrate Recovery groups, as a friend explained staring at his cup of coffee, is expressed in one word: dependency.

“None of us can make it on our own – isn’t that why Jesus came?” he said. “Many churches give off a self-satisfied air, a piety or superiority, an attitude of judgement toward others. If they are consciously leaning on God, they seem to hide it; their lives seem to be all in order. It’s a funny thing,” he said at last, “what I hate most about myself, my alcoholism, was the one thing God used to bring me back to him. Because of it, I know I can’t survive without God. I depend on him and I depend on my community to make it through each and every day.”

I like that about church; it’s ok not to be ok. That’s oddly hopeful.

If you’re feeling unwell today, physically, mentally, emotionally, send a message on Facebook if you’d like prayer for healing. God can sort out the details. His word to us is ask, seek, knock. We are depending on a God who loves overwhelmingly and unconditionally.

Third thing the Church community is not: The Church is not predictable because God is not predictable; God is consistent in character but unpredictable in behaviour and that, my friends, is a great treasure. Like a colleague of mine who offered Church on Sundays upstairs at a local arena; the siblings who weren’t playing hockey would come and sometimes parents. The sign said Missed Church Today? Come upstairs. Ten Minute Service. He lit a candle, bible reading, a craft, a prayer, a snack, promoted by his stuffed frog; innovative, fun worship, in 10 minutes. Or Zoom Coffee Hour when we see a video of our Associate David climbing a 60-foot sheer rock cliff with ropes around him, ascending to a monastery in Northern Ethiopia, Africa, a church community founded in the fourth century AD. Wow David, and your sermon last week was solid and fabulous at the same time.

Finally, I found one of life’s greatest treasures, an unexpected joy, a hope for the future, in a place I least expected it. The Whitby Psychiatric Hospital, what is now Ontario Shores Centre of Mental Health Sciences.

I was apprehensive about taking a course at the Whitby Psych as it was known. One resident told me on a locked ward that HE was Jesus and I had probably bought my license to minister from the States for \$10.00

How was the experience at the Whitby Psychiatric Hospital Chapel, a treasure, and an indicator that church is unpredictable? My eyes opened to the fact that worshipping Jesus and the worshipping community was a much richer experience than I had imagined. I had not imagined that people struggling with their mental health and who were resident in the facility might also be followers of Christ, - how narrow minded of me - contributors to its worship and as valued sons and daughters of God as any first-year seminary student. I began to see the treasure of these people was not based on their academic achievement, economic status or mental state. I began to see the treasure of who I am is not based on any of these things. I am loved simply for being me, in whatever state of mind or health I find myself in. I felt an acceptance, a perspective, a time of sharing small victories and growing that was transformative.

If these people with varying grips on what we call reality, fellow travelers on a pain-filled journey, could depend on God, could worship alongside volunteers, some of whom from Christ Church, then maybe there’s room for people like me in the church and in church leadership, suffering from my own delusions, brokenness and prejudice. Rather than being overcome with fear, I was overwhelmed with affirmation in a way we might describe as the community of the heart.

That summer, that experience of community is part of the way God spoke to me to pursue ordination as a priest. The Supervised Pastoral Education course and particularly the chapel worship at Whitby Psych, gave me hope that church community is not all the same, not all together and not predictable. That sounds like God the Trinity.

So, here's an application of today's sermon: don't try to explain the Trinity, because a mystery cannot be explained. It can only be experienced. So be a witness to where and how you have seen and known mystery at work, in your life, in the life of our community, and in the world we are called to serve. My granddaughter Charlotte's new squeals and cackles, tossing petals at her Uncle Nicholas' wedding or a follower of Jesus in palliative care dying in peaceful anticipation of his new heavenly dance partner, or a child's witness to love so tender that God is undeniably at work, the little boy fidgeting with his candy bar in a TV ad, who sees a girl on the bus and thinks about giving her a piece. So busy, being a witness to mystery that we forget ourselves and are overwhelmed by the love, and are surprised to discover hope filling our sails. We aspire to what Jesus creates; a diverse, dependent, unpredictable community of people learning to live to God's glory.

Our own hearts become places of hospitality, a community in our heart, as God's overwhelming love shapes us and reshapes us and shapes us again, expanding our capacity, enlarging our willingness to offer in return that same love, generosity, and goodness.

Debra Dean Murphy quotes poet Micheal O' Siadhail (Mee-Hawl O'Sheel) who says with his own overwhelming beauty:

*Gratuitous, beyond our fathom, both binding and freeing,
this love re-invades us, shifts the boundaries of our being.*

– Micheal O'Siadhail, 'Out of the Blue', in *Poems 1975–1995: Hail! Madam Jazz and A Fragile City* (Bloodaxe: Newcastle upon Tyne, 1999), 124.