

*Holy God, we praise you for Your grace, which works with incalculable power to create, redeem, and sustain life.<sup>1</sup> We gather around your holy Word, eager to know You even as we yield to Your ineffable mystery. Teach us, gracious God: draw us deeper into Your truth, for the sake of Your love. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

It's fascinating to me how *difference* and *unity* can be politicized in so many contexts. For generations now, these have been polarizing words. "Difference," in many conversations, can signal anxiety or even communicate open antagonism. "Different" can mean not like us, strange, problematic. Difference can feel destabilizing, especially for groups built on homogeneity or narrow vision.

"Unity" is no better. Language of "unity" can be used to enforce conformity or stall on change. We saw that in the arguments between W. E. B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington on civil rights, and we've seen it in Anglican Communion debates about human sexuality. LGBTQ folks, gender warriors, and their allies have been accused of disrupting the "unity" of the Body of Christ—a misguided charge, since that purported "unity" had been based on silencing the witness of gay believers and excluding them from full participation in the life of the Church.

For those wary of mainstream norms, "unity" can be alarming. Surrendering to "unity" can mean not claiming your truth, remaining invisible. No, thank you.

Finding common ground is one thing. Relentless pressure to be “the same” is something else—something dangerous.

If “difference” can be used to judge and exclude,

and “unity” can be used to suppress dissent,

what do we do in our common life as Christians,

as people of diverse gifts<sup>2</sup> and competing perspectives

who are called to live as the Body of Christ?

How do we honor difference without undermining community?

How do we embrace unity without subordinating or silencing others?

It’s a dilemma.

If we were left to our own devices,

left to our polarizing arguments and our in-groups,

our hierarchies and barriers,

our fear of change and our drive to conform,

we’d be in deep trouble.

Blessedly, we have a remedy. [I’m sure you know where this is going....]

*Trinitarian theology* to the rescue!

This morning is Trinity Sunday, one of the seven most important feasts in the Christian calendar—right up there with All Saints’ and Pentecost.<sup>3</sup> Now, there might be a handful of you who don’t immerse yourself daily in Trinitarian theology,

and that's fair [I am *not* looking at David Kelsey right now] ... and you might wonder: What's the big deal? Well, a lot is at stake for Christians when we pray to God the One in Three—one divine Essence expressed in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the early centuries of the Christian Church right up until, you know, *today*, Christians have fiercely debated how to understand who God is, given the incarnation of Christ and the advent of the Holy Spirit.

Friends, I'm here to tell you that the Trinity is good news! At the heart of who God is, here's what we don't find. We don't find an oversized caricature of what we humans do with power, which is generally to harm one another. We don't find a terrifying Monarch who reaches down to rescue or destroy us insects at whim. Trinitarian theology reminds us that at the very heart of God, what we find is mutual relation in love. We find Father, Son, and Spirit in a joyous eternal dance, inseparable yet unique, each perpetually drawing near the other in love and going forth in love.

In the Trinity, *difference* is real, but it involves no separation or domination.

In the Trinity, *unity* is real, but it involves no coercion or erasure of the Other.

The grace of the Triune God calls us away from our sinful desire for domination, which wreaks such havoc and leaves such terrible woundedness in its wake. The grace of the Triune God calls us back to loving mutuality.<sup>4</sup>

The Trinity is an unfathomable Mystery, sure. But there are things it can teach us. You'll be delighted to hear that you don't actually have to read *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*.<sup>5</sup> (Yes, it does exist: weighing in at over 600 pages, it's nevertheless a mere pamphlet in the avalanche of works on the Trinity.) Instead of research, I commend *prayer*. Go to our Trinitarian God in prayer, and if possible, prayer deeper than words—centering prayer. But while I have you here, let me offer two points that the Trinity has taught me.

First, the Trinity teaches that bodies matter. Embodied living matters to the God whose nature includes the Incarnate Son, Jesus, as a coequal partner in creation and redemption,<sup>6</sup> and the Holy Spirit as a coequal partner in the ongoing transformation of the real life of the world.

Bodies matter. In his Palestinian body, Jesus ministered and suffered in a particular place, Israel, at a particular time in history, when Pontius Pilate was the Roman governor of Judea. Jesus ate bread and fruit and broiled fish; he walked the dusty roads of Nazareth and the bustling streets of Jerusalem. Jesus laughed with his disciples; he prayed and taught and wept; he read Scripture and argued with the local rabbis. Sometimes he was exhausted and despondent; other times he was full of zeal to call his people back to God. Jesus lived in a real body, and he healed the real bodies of those who came to him.

Bodies matter.<sup>7</sup>

Our bodies and our living are crucial for understanding  
who God is,  
what grace is,  
and what the Church is called to be.

So I want you to know grace in your bodies,  
in the beautiful idiosyncratic particularity of you.

I want you to trust God's unbounded love for you,  
in the body that you inhabit, just as you are,  
with your strengths and your weaknesses,  
your patience and your desires,  
your anxieties and your hopes,  
your gifts and your vulnerabilities.

We worship a Lord who has made embodied living holy—ALL embodied living.

Whether your living is as male, female, trans\*, genderqueer, or other,  
straight, gay, queer, asexual, or other,  
your living is holy.

You get to know grace in your body, in your *difference*,  
in all the ways you live into creativity and love and mutuality.

A second thing the Trinity teaches is this:

truly mutual loving relation requires that we yield power.

How do we know that? Because the Father—the unbegotten Creator of all—has yielded power to the Son.<sup>8</sup> In our Gospel reading from Matthew 28, the resurrected Christ confirms, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”<sup>9</sup> An astonishing claim!

Yielding power in love is *who God is* [many New Testament passages attest to this; Philippians 2 and many others], and we are made in God’s image.<sup>10</sup>

The Creator of the cosmos has given all authority in heaven and on earth to the resurrected Christ! This is emancipatory for Christians, because we make our boast not in our own strength but in Christ.<sup>11</sup>

Our power is in Christ.

Our *unity* is in Christ.

Each of you is beloved of God in your *difference*, just as you are.

Each of you is called away from hierarchy and domination into the *unity* of love in Christ.

Last week I was in Berkeley, California with our firstborn, Dinah, a genderqueer Christian who sings in this choir when they’re home. We went to a vegan restaurant called The Butcher’s Son, and it was glorious. (My vegan Reuben sandwich was *so* delicious, but that’s not important right now.) I want to tell you about the marvelously diverse crowd of patrons.

Everywhere you looked, there were elaborate artful tattoos, gorgeous purple and green hair, smooth shaved heads and Mohawks reaching toward heaven, piercings glittering in the sun. There were straight parents playing with their kids, and older gay couples, and beautiful gender-ambiguous individuals goofing around with their friends. So much difference on display, and yet such a deep sense of community! I tell you, the place just *hummed with joy*.

Something like that feast awaits you.

You are invited to the Table of a God who is love and mutuality,

a Table at which an infinite number of souls can find their places together,<sup>12</sup>

a Table that hums with joy.

Rejoice and be glad, my friends!

In the name of the holy and undivided Trinity, one God. Amen.

Carolyn J. Sharp

11 June 2017

Trinity Sunday, Year A

Genesis 1:1-2:4a, Psalm 8, 2 Corinthians 13:11-13, Matthew 28:16-20

Preached at St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut

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<sup>1</sup> This oblique allusion to God as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer is not intended in a modalist way, as I hope is clear from my attributing those properties to the one (Triune) God's grace at work in the world.

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<sup>2</sup> See 1 Corinthians 12.

<sup>3</sup> The seven principal feasts observed by the Episcopal Church are Easter, Ascension Day, The Day of Pentecost, Trinity Sunday, All Saints' Day, Christmas Day, and The Epiphany.

<sup>4</sup> When Christians are baptized, we are reborn into participation in the Trinitarian life of God, being baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19). The Matthew verse is considered to be the earliest articulation of the Trinitarian formula.

<sup>5</sup> *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, ed. Gilles Emery, O.P. and Matthew Levering; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Particularly helpful to me was the essay by Risto Saarinen, "The Trinity, Creation, and Anthropology" (pp. 414-27); see also Kathryn Tanner, "The Trinity as Christian Teaching" (pp. 349-58). On intersections of Christian theology with issues of sexual and gender identity, one may consult another volume in the same series, *The Oxford Handbook of Theology, Sexuality, and Gender* (ed. Adrian Thatcher; 2015). Queer theory and queer biblical hermeneutics are rich areas of scholarly inquiry that are virtually unknown to lay persons in the Church. Those wishing to explore that marvelous terrain might consult the following: Robert E. Goss and Mona West, eds., *Take Back the Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2000); Deryn Guest, Robert E. Goss, Mona West, and Thomas Bohache, eds., *The Queer Bible Commentary* (London: SCM, 2006); Donald E. Hall and Annamarie Jagose, eds., *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Nancy Wilson, *Outing the Bible: Queer Folks, God, Jesus, and the Christian Scriptures* (Indianapolis: LifeJourney, 2013); and books by Stephen D. Moore and Ken Stone.

<sup>6</sup> On the Son as partner in creation, theologians cite the creative action of the Logos in the Prologue to John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (John 1:1-3).

<sup>7</sup> Today we celebrate Pride Sunday, a day of affirmation of LGBTQ+ folks within and beyond the Church. For decades now, feminist, womanist, queer, and other liberationist theologians have insisted that lived experience matters and constitutes a crucial site for theological analysis. That claim, which one might think would be transparently obvious to Christians concerned with the Incarnation, has not yet gotten the deep traction it deserves in many of the theological subdisciplines. In some quarters, purportedly "neutral" scholarship still proceeds without much reference to bodiedness or other dimensions of gendered and sexed living in community. Rich terrain still lies ahead for theological exploration in this regard.

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<sup>8</sup> I make this point while standing fully in accord with the Western orthodox theological claim that there is no fixed hierarchy or permanent subordination within the Trinity.

<sup>9</sup> Christian theological arguments about operational subordinationism have long focused on the potential subordination of the Son and the Spirit to the Father. Matthew 28:18 could be argued to underline the priority of the Father in the Father's having given authority to the Son, yet the inescapable sense of the result is that the Son is now in authority over all things in heaven and on earth, potentially eclipsing even the authority of the Father. The notion of *shared authority* is one way of solving this, of course. Another problem raised by Matthew 28:18 is that it suggests Jesus has *newly* been given power that, as co-equal and eternal with the Father, he should already have had. Ulrich Luz frames this in terms of the created order: "For all of early Christianity it is true that all powers are subject to the exalted Jesus (Rom 1:4; Phil 2:9-11; Col 1:18-20; Eph 1:20-22; 1 Pet 3:22; Heb 1:3-4). Thus the entire world was turned upside down by the resurrection of Jesus" (*Matthew 21-28* [Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005], 624; see also Luz's note on p. 625 about the early history of interpretation regarding the problem). On the problem of the potential subordination of the Son to the Father and the Spirit that seems to be being described in certain New Testament passages, Kathryn Tanner offers a helpful brief look at early Christian arguments; see her "Trinity as Christian Teaching" (n. 5 above), pp. 353-55.

<sup>10</sup> In what ways the nature of the Trinity does and does not relate to human nature constitutes a complex set of questions. Genesis 1:27 (humans having been made in the image of God) may be adduced in the discussion, but that Scripture passage does not provide a complete or obvious answer.

<sup>11</sup> See 1 Cor 1:31.

<sup>12</sup> This notion of the heavenly banquet table as able to accommodate countless guests is adumbrated in Linn Marie Tonstad's book, *God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude* (Gender, Theology and Spirituality 17; New York: Routledge, 2016), 238-46. Tonstad writes, "In the banquet that God provides, Jesus has made room for us by his side in the house of God. The transformation of materiality signaled in the eucharist ... [means that] the body's limits do not disappear, but spatial location becomes coinhabitable.... One need not move aside to make room for the other, for there is enough space for all.... imagine the heavenly banquet table around which we gather as simultaneously huge and tiny—everyone crowds in next to each other, yet somehow, the closer everyone gets, there is always room for all" (239, 243). While some will see an error of logic in the proposal that material space will be changed, I find the image of the infinitely capacious table (see Isa 25:6-10; Luke 16:19-31) to be evocative for an understanding of redeemed relationship in the realm of God.