

May 27, 2018 (Trinity Sunday)

TEXT: Romans 8:12–17a

TITLE: A Sense of Belonging

By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf

Today is Trinity Sunday—as it is every Sunday following Pentecost. There might not be any triangle shaped balloons, but today we celebrate that we worship one God who is, in God’s own self, three persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit, or creator, redeemer and sustainer. We take a minute to revisit the doctrine developed at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD, in an effort to give voice to the divinity of Christ and the Spirit while maintaining our belief in one God. Those gathered coined the term “homoousios” meaning *same substance*, to try to articulate a divine mystery about one God who was one being but three unique relationships—within God’s self and to the world.

We try to understand it but tread lightly, lest we expose all that we DON’T know about God. We play around with imperfect analogies to try to wrap our heads around the mystery:

- God is like H₂O: ice, water and steam, but not a glass of water that changes form depending on the temperature, rather all three, all at the same time;
- God is like Pastor Randy: father, husband and pastor all at the same time...except that Randy’s relates to different people in different ways, while God relates to all of us the same.

A pastor writes of her first Children’s Message she delivered as a seminary student, nearly 30 years ago. She sat down on the chancel steps on Trinity Sunday, certain that she had the perfect object lesson. She tells of coming forward holding a banana and asking the kids how many bananas she had, to which they all answered “one.” So she proceeds to separate the banana into three equal parts, and asks the kids if she is still holding one banana. Some said yes, and some said no. Then she explains that it is still one banana, just in three equal parts. She writes:

I launched into explaining that all three parts were equal and had the same amount of “bananeness” as the one banana had before I separated it. Little heads nodded.

I gave them all a piece of the banana to eat...and as they ate their banana pieces, I asked the fatal question: Tomorrow morning when you have bananas on your cornflakes, what are you going to think about? One, angelic little blond-haired, blue-eyed, dimpled innocent three-year-old said, “God is bananas!”¹

Trinity Sunday is a day when we might acknowledge that that three-year-old girl might be onto something. Perhaps God is bananas—or perhaps we are driven a little bananas when we try to wrap our heads around something so inexplicable.

¹ <https://revgalblogpals.org/2018/05/22/rc1-the-joys-of-trinity-sunday/>

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, when speaking of the Trinity:

Who are all these people? How can God the Father be his own son? And if Jesus is God, then whom is he talking to? And where does the Holy Spirit come in? Is that the spirit of God, the spirit of Jesus, or someone else altogether? If they are all one, then why do they come and go at different times, and how can one of them send another of them?

There are orthodox answers to all of these questions but I have never entirely understood any of them. I accept them as earnest human efforts to describe something that cannot ever be described, which is the nature of God. We would probably be better off if we left that whole subject alone, but if you have ever lain on your back looking up at a summer night's sky full of stars then you know how hard that is to do.²

We long to understand God, and to discern how God works. As Taylor states, we can't let it go. Maybe if we can get to the bottom of who God is, we can figure out who we are too.

We're all too familiar with human ways: finding identity through comparison, turning comparisons into dividing lines. So when it comes to "church talk", too often someone will say that if we are in God's favor, we can point to others who are not; if we are accepted, someone else must be left out; if we are loved then surely there are others who are not.

The opening verses of our New Testament text for today seem to be marching to the beat of this same drum. Paul paints a picture of a world divided by flesh and spirit, sinful and saved. To live according to the flesh means death; to live according to the spirit means life. So we get into list making mode and try to sort it out...realizing that our best efforts just complicate things even more.

But if we keep reading, we see that the passage in Romans continues away from these lines, pointing us toward a snapshot of how GOD works. Our text for today one of the rare instances in Scripture in which we see all three persons of the Trinity referenced together. Paul's letter to the church in Rome—and God's word to us—reminds us quickly that the lists we feel compelled to make don't really matter much at all. In fact, the primary actor in the story is not even *us*, it turns out. And, God is the one busily at work choosing us, claiming us as God's own, calling us "beloved children." God is not drawing lines in the sand or even separating sheep and goats. God is loving God's people—God is loving us.

² Taylor, Barbara Brown. "Three Hands Clapping" in *Home By Another Way*. P 154.

And frankly, our efforts have no bearing on God's work. Rather, the words Paul uses for humanity are passive: *led, received*. The Holy Spirit is the one who is on the move, acting among us and through us—leading and guiding. We just have to be open receptacles and receive the gift—a gift freely offered to all.

Paul's portrait of a Triune God shows us a God working together within God's self for the salvation of the world. The Spirit leads and testifies within us and on our behalf; Jesus suffers and is risen, inheriting the hardest parts of being human so that, through him, we might inherit the best parts of being divine; and God the creator adopts us all, claiming us as God's own, naming us as beloved children.

What does it boil down to? *God is love*. Within God's self and reaching out to all

Paul reminds us that through the initiative of God, we *belong*. We are claimed as God's own, are part of God's family, have purpose and meaning in our lives. Paul contrasts this divine acceptance against a "spirit of slavery." While either term might connote a form of belonging, the belonging of slavery is possessive and oppressive. But we are not *possessions* of God, nor are we to live under God's thumb. Rather we are claimed as children—accepted, loved and free.

Why does this matter? Why do we care?

Well, for starters, belonging is important. It is critical to our survival as a species. We are dependent from birth on the benevolence of others who will ensure our safety and well-being. (TED TALK). And we are social beings—we organize ourselves into communities and rely on one another for education, medical care, and infrastructure. When our engagement in these communities is wounded, we are hurt. When our experience in these communities is affirming, we feel safe.

Social Worker and author Brene Brown writes: "Belonging is the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us."³ A sense of belonging isn't merely about membership, but it is about connection. It's about worth. It's about accepting yourself and trusting that others have accepted you for who you really are.

And in spite of our need for belonging, we live in a polarized world where too often this sense of belonging is formed on the false premise that one belongs only others are left out. iPhone videos bring the reality home, as time and time again, stories cross the airwaves of people trying to exclude those who are different from them, certain they don't belong: for citizens of this nation who are being threatened by calls to ICE because they speak Spanish in public; for African American men and women being reported to cops for waiting in Starbucks for a friend or sleeping in the lounge of their own Harvard dorm. There are messages all-around of exclusion, of denigration, and sometimes even of hate.

³ <https://ideas.ted.com/finding-our-way-to-true-belonging/>

Paul tells a different story. It speaks hope into even the harshest of circumstances with a message of God's gracious embrace. Paul reminds us that, in fact, we DO belong—ALL OF US are held in the loving embrace of the Triune God.

We are a part of something bigger than ourselves. God has formed us into a family. We are heirs of the kingdom, adopted as children by the God who loves us, in spite of all we do to stray, or our vulnerable imperfections that tug us in other directions. The Triune God has got us and will not let us go. We belong. We belong to ourselves. We belong to each other. We belong to God.

Now, as much as this message might feel like a cool breeze on a warm day we need to remember that God calls those God loves. Every relationship is inviting and sending—from Moses to Mary, to every disciple who encountered the Risen Christ. And so this message of comfort has a tinge of challenge too: Perhaps we, as recipients of unmerited love, can love without conditions too? Perhaps we can welcome the stranger or care for the needs of others, even when the needy don't live under our own roof—or look like us, or talk like us, or even worship the same God as us!

And if we want to take this whole belonging thing to the next level, maybe we can strive to find the worth in the neighbor who lets their dog poop in our front lawn, or the cousin who doesn't vote as we do. And maybe we can get the word out, that belonging isn't as fragile as we might make it out to be—that, really, there's not much that we need to do except *receive it*. And maybe people will stop being so afraid of not belonging that they will start to accept others who they once saw as enemies. Maybe fears will dissolve, and with them violence and hate.

See, the God who *is* a relationship in God's own self has called US into relationship too—with God and with one another, in a way that is this relationship is to be life-giving, healing, merciful. God calls us to love.

The week our son was born, he received a card in the mail. It was the first piece of mail addressed to him. Inside was a card with dozens of signatures on it – and almost as many notes. They were written by kids of this church who attend club 116, the Wednesday evening youth program, and the adults who volunteer. Some of the kids said that they couldn't wait to meet him. One welcomed him to this crazy world. And a few even wrote that they loved him—without even meeting him first.

This past school year, our son would usually join me for the opening portion of club one sixteen—where the kids all gather together for a game, introductions, prayer, and a Bible lesson before breaking into age groups for the rest of the evening's programming. One evening, our son was fussy and I realized that the only way that I would be able to teach the kids about Jesus calling the disciples would be to sing it. So I started singing a random tune and telling the story of Jesus calling to some fishermen on the sea. Sometimes, by the grace of God, it even rhymed. And the kids—all of them—just smiled at the squirmy baby in my arms, clapping to the rhythm of the song with their hands on their laps, totally unprompted. Instinctively, they became a part of the song that calmed

him down, and became a part of the song that told the story of God's call. They were letting him know that disruptive or fussy or not, he was welcome. He was loved. He belonged.

By God's grace, we, too, belong. May we hear the gracious story of a Triune God who made us and redeemed us and who sustains us. May we hear the song about how God claims us, calls us and sends us, and may we find a way to join in the song, so that all will know that God loves them too.