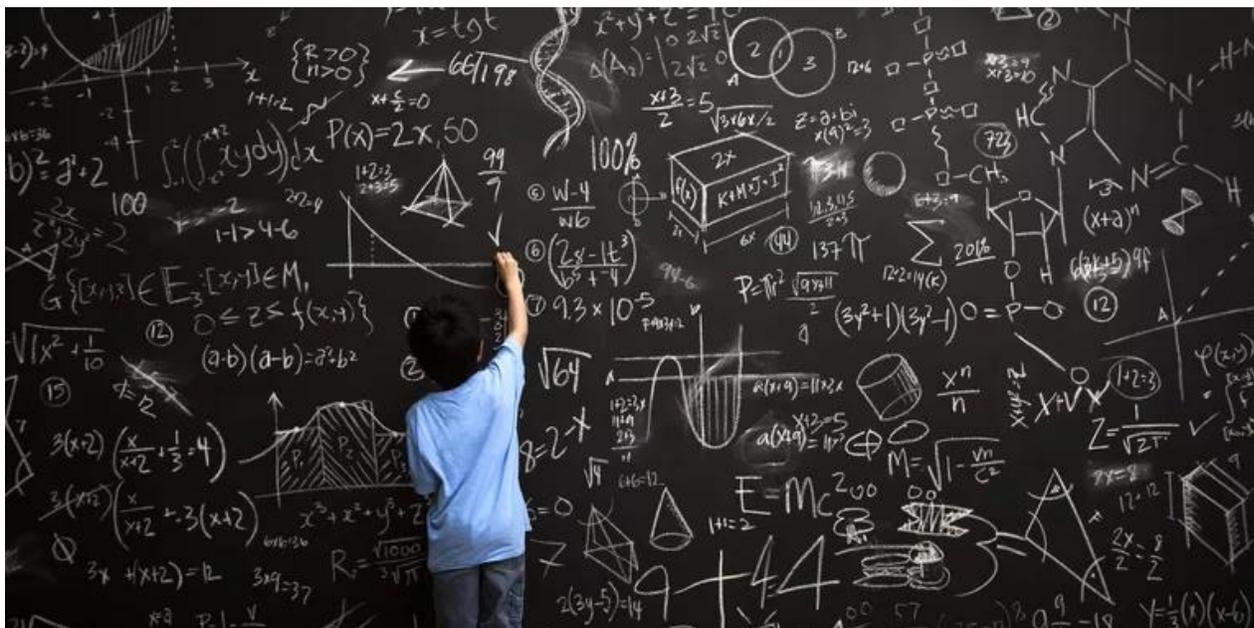


1+1+1=1

A Sermon by Rev. Joann H. Lee
June 2, 2019



Scripture: John 17:20-26

I ask not only on behalf of these,
but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word,
that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you,
may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.
The glory that you have given me I have given them,
so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me,
that they may become completely one,
so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them
even as you have loved me.
Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me,
may be with me where I am, to see my glory,
which you have given me because you loved me
before the foundation of the world.

'Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you;
and these know that you have sent me.
I made your name known to them, and I will make it known,
so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.'

This is the Word of the Lord,
Thanks be to God.

CHAPTERS 14 THROUGH 17 IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN is known as Jesus' Farewell Discourse. These are the words he shares and prays on his last night with his disciples. And even though we're well-past Holy Week, and we've celebrated Easter, the weeks between Easter and Pentecost are still considered Eastertide, the season of Easter, and in our lectionary readings, we often find these passages from John to remind us of what Jesus wanted his disciples to know and remember as he prepared to leave them.

In today's passage, there is a lot of talk about being made one. And Jesus uses the example of his relationship with God the Creator to demonstrate how our relationship should also be with God and with one another.

For me, one cannot get by without at least examining the nature of the Trinity to better understand what Jesus is saying through this prayer. Now the word “Trinity” itself does not exist in the Bible. It is a word that describes church doctrine, something human beings came up with to try and describe the nature of God.

We do, however, see scripture pointing us to the concept of Trinity and to this unique and mysterious relationship. In fact, within Jesus’ Farewell Discourse, he promises that the Holy Spirit will be sent by God the Creator to be with the disciples when Jesus leaves (John 14:16-18a).

So that’s all three persons of the Trinity right there: God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit; also sometimes known as the “Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,” or “Creator, Christ, and Spirit,” or “Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.” And here’s one you probably haven’t heard but is used and lifted up in some churches: “Mother, Child, and Womb.” That one was new to me. For as long as people have been on earth, we have tried to use our words to describe and understand a God who is both transcendent and immanent. Immanent in that God is within us; we are created in the image of God; God is intimate and close and chooses to move towards us to love us. And yet, transcendent in that God is also beyond our knowing, beyond our understanding, a mystery, wholly other. I joke in new member classes, that good theology makes for bad math. Jesus, for example, is fully human and fully divine: not 50% human and 50% God, but 100% human and 100% God, the math just doesn’t add up.

And then there’s the Trinity, 3 unique persons that make up one God. Since when did $1+1+1=1$? I honestly don’t know. It doesn’t make sense, and I’m not sure it’s supposed to. Now, there *are* some ways that we might think of the Trinity, but they all fall short. Perhaps you’ve heard of the three-leaf clover example, how each leaf is unique, but all part of one thing. Or perhaps you’ve heard the example of an apple being used. There’s a children’s book called *3 in 1* that does this. An apple has the peel, the flesh, and the core – all three of these components separately are still considered an apple and all three are necessary for an apple to be an apple, but they are also each distinct and unique. Another way to think about the Trinity is to consider the compound H₂O. H₂O can exist in our world in three unique ways: as water, as steam, and as ice. In each of those ways, it’s still H₂O, but the way we experience them is completely different.

Now all of these examples reach towards understanding, but they do not completely explain the Trinity. And perhaps that’s ok. Perhaps that’s where our faith steps in. Anne Lamott (via Paul Tillich) reminds us that once we are certain of something, faith is no longer necessary. So, to not know for sure is one way we exercise our faith. One of the ways the Book of Order has described the role of a minister is as a “Steward of the Mysteries of God,” not *explainer* of the mysteries of God, not even *understander* of the mysteries of God, but a steward, one who holds and makes room for and cares for these mysteries. I love that image. I love it because, as a pastor, it’s all I can really commit to do any way. And when you’ve got a bunch of theology that doesn’t quite add up in logical or mathematical or linear ways, it’s all you can lean on. Take comfort in not fully knowing; rest in that mystery.

Now, admittedly, trying to accept all this mystery is easier, when God is tangible and immanent in other ways, through music and singing, through worship and prayers, through community and other people. When we can feel and experience God in ways that touch our hearts and our souls, it is easier to hold lightly the mysteries that our minds cannot fathom. That’s not to say our minds do not matter because they do. Especially as Presbyterians, of course they do. But our minds are not the only one way we can know and experience God.

The way Jesus speaks of, again and again, is arguably far more accessible and far more tangible; it’s through love and through relationship. Love, embodied by less-than-perfect human beings; love that shows up again and again by your side when everything else seems to be falling apart; love that holds your hand and prays with you; love that sits silently next to you, allowing for you to feel the fullness of your grief or joy or pain. Real love, messy love, love between people who are not God, but have experienced God’s overwhelming love for them and for the world.

And love is what unites us, makes us one, and makes us the Body of Christ no matter our differences. Kathleen Norris says, “For Christians, the Trinity is the primary symbol of a community that holds together by containing diversity within itself.”

The Trinity reveals to us that if we are indeed created in the image of God, then (1) we are created for community because God has always existed in community, And (2) difference within that community is needed and necessary. We can't all be the same, and we can't all have the same function. Diversity is essential. Ultimately, the Trinity cannot be explained, not in a sermon, not in a book, not through our words. All we can really do, faithfully and honestly, is to wonder, to wonder about the mysteries of God. When was the last time you allowed yourself to not have all the answers, but to just be curious and to wonder, to look around you and to feel wholly insignificant because the world and universe are so large and yet fully loved because God was so near? When was the last time you allowed your mind and your soul and your body to wonder and to wander without a destination? Somewhere, in those moments, in that holy curiosity, that wondering and wandering, we may just find God within ourselves and all around us. And this morning, I'd like us to spend some time wondering together, how we might embody the Trinity. Not because we are God, but because we are created in the image of God and called to be God's embodiment here on earth today.

And so we take the three persons of the Trinity.

And we wonder, in what ways are you called to create? How are you like God the Father, God the Mother, or God the Parent? How are you bringing forth new life and new creation into this world? What are you helping to create and birth into reality? Maybe it's a new office culture, maybe it's literally new life through children or plants or milkweed for the monarchs. We are all called to be creators in some way, even if we might not consider ourselves creative. So what are you bringing and birthing into the world with the help of God? And how are you called to be like Jesus, God the child, God the Redeemer who lived and walked on this earth, who met people who would betray him and even kill him, yet chose to love recklessly through it all, and through that love, to heal and to save the world? How are you called to save lives, to bring healing, and to help redeem a broken people and system?

Is it through supporting and volunteering with our Breaking Cycles of Poverty partners? Is it through proclaiming that Black Lives Matter, that Trans Lives Matter, that the lives of children on the border matter? Is it through giving food to those hungry, helping relieve the debt of those who have accumulated hospital bills, through providing mosquito nets to people living in places with malaria, or as Jesus often did, through critiquing and protesting the powers and principalities that treat other human beings as less than? In what ways are you the hands and feet of Christ in this world? And, finally, how are you like the Spirit of God that is active and alive in our world today? Jesus called the Holy Spirit, The Advocate, one who advocates on our behalf, supporting and inspiring us. The Holy Spirit encourages us, spurs us on to do justice and seek peace in the world, she is the one who gives us courage and faith.

So how are you encouraging others? How are you advocating on behalf of those who cannot advocate for themselves? Perhaps you are showing up in the courtroom for deportation hearings, perhaps you are a mentor to a young person, perhaps you give voice to those who have long been silenced, perhaps you are able to give hope to someone who desperately needs it. In what ways are you moving through this world, sharing your light and setting aflame goodness and mercy to all whom you encounter?

I invite you to spend some time this week in holy wonder, asking God how you are being led and called to embody the Trinity in your own lives. And because Jesus' prayer was not for the individual, but the for the collective, that second person plural – "all y'all", you are invited to consider how the church, the people of God might be called to do such things in our own communities and in the world. It starts and ends with love. Mother Theresa once said, "Not all of us can do great things. But we can all do small things with great love." I suppose some people were designed and destined for great things. But most of us, most of us are simply called to do small things with great love.

And for Jesus, on the last night before he was arrested, crucified, and buried, it began with the simple act of love around a Table. Jesus showed us that to truly love and to lead was to serve others, to physically and metaphorically wash the feet of those whom others would say are "beneath" us, but whom Jesus would say we are called us to serve.

It is a message of love that upended the order of things, that changed the understanding of what people held to be true. And when we gather around this Table, we proclaim that indeed, the first shall be last and the last shall be first, that to love means to be in service to others, that each and every human being embodies the image of God and has the capacity to be God to us, and us, God to them. And perhaps most importantly, around this Table, all are welcome and served by Jesus. Through food, we are shown love; that's definitely my love language. Somehow, around this Table, God's people in every time and place are united as one. That's not $1+1+1=1$, that's thousands, millions of people, with a place at the Table, all included, all sitting and being served by Jesus.

This is a meal of radical welcome and love. It is where everything Jesus prayed for becomes fulfilled, even if just for a moment. Partaking in this meal is an act of hope. It is an act of unity. And it is a radical proclamation that we are loved by a God who exists in community through the Trinity, so that we might know and experience that same love and relationship at this Table.

So, come and eat. Christ who prayed for our unity, who prayed that we might know love and be love welcomes us to a Table where it is made so.

Amen.

