**“God of Watercolors”**

A Sermon for Trinity Sunday

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I.

I haven’t done it here at St. Paul’s yet, but one of my favorite creative activities is to have a group of people use watercolors to paint images of what they each think God looks like. So watch out if you see me coming towards you with paintbrushes!

Whenever I do this the images are different. Usually there are a few old men with grey beards, several Jesus Christ’s at various stages of his life, at least one or two birds, and several more abstract images of color and light and shapes.

I always use water colors when I do this, and sometimes people get frustrated because it’s very hard to draw a definite line with water colors. As soon as the water hits the paper the clear lines of color bleed across whatever boundaries I had tried to set. But this property of watercolors actually makes it a medium well-suited to this particular exercise.

Any image or drawing or sentence or description that we create to describe who God is will always be somewhat incomplete or imprecise. Those images and phrases are our attempts at drawing clear, definite lines around an infinite God. These clear lines have value in that they give God a recognizable shape, a form that has symbolic meaning that can be taught, learned, reflected upon, and to which we can pray.

But God’s exact reality is shielded from humanity, shrouded in mystery, unable to be reproduced, spoken, or drawn, even if we could draw the finest lines, had the most precise language. God’s reality is always more textured, more complex, more life-giving than we can describe it to be. And as we walk through our earthly pilgrimage as children of God, over time we gain glimpses into more and more facets of the Divine. I think this is why, as we grow older, our own personal images of God change over time.

Certainly for me, at least, the image of God I had when I was a pre-schooler is not the same as the one I have today. I’m not sure we ever fully discard or move beyond the images of God we had when we were five years old, or fifteen, or twenty six or forty-five. And I don’t think we necessarily need to. Rather, those first images are joined to other images – forming, over time, a layered, hybrid image, always revealing the greater abundance of the Divine Being.

And what about you? Can you remember your earliest Sunday School image of what God looked like? And when I said, “Let Us Pray” at the beginning of this service, what did the one who was listening to your prayers look like today?

II.

Over the many times I’ve invited people to do the watercolor activity, while there have been a tremendous diversity among the images, not a single person had attempted a representation of the Trinity itself. I wonder how many of us, in our lifetimes of collecting images of God, have created an image in our minds of God as Trinity.

If you haven’t, don’t be alarmed. In Western Christianity, we tend to focus our intentions in prayer to one of the three persons of the Trinity at a time. It’s a kind of “Left-brained” approach to addressing our Triune God. We pray to the Father, which for me summons up images of the architect of Creation, the one who orders the world. Or we pray to Jesus Christ: the infant Jesus of the Manger, or the wise Jesus of the Beatitudes, or the angry Jesus cleaning the temple, or the passionate Jesus on the Cross, or the forgiving Jesus who cooks his disciples Easter breakfast on the beach. Or, maybe sometimes, we pray to the Holy Spirit, who sweeps through the world like the wind, and who dwells in our hearts offering guidance and wisdom.

Focusing our prayers on one person of the Trinity helps make our image of God seem more precise and recognizable – less of a watercolor and more of a clear line. But in parts of the Eastern Christian Churches, a tradition of praying directly to the Holy Trinity has persisted. In my occasional experiences of this type of prayer, it’s a much more right-brained thing. It’s about entering into a kind of mystery, an unknowing, a kind of relational energy.

The Doctrine of the Trinity, I would argue, that is the most distinctively Christian doctrine of God among the world’s religions. No other faith system worships a single God consisting of three persons. Of course there are many polytheistic religions out there, with three, or seven or eight-hundred deities, but we claim we’re not polytheistic: our three, are really one. And there are other monotheistic faiths, but none of them claim an *inherently relational quality* to their God. Some of them proclaim a God who is in relationship with other beings, but none of them worship a God whose fundamental nature is itself relational. It’s like watercolors – the line is often blurry: there is distinction among the three persons, but the boundaries are not as clear as our left-brains might like them.

The three persons of the Trinity are mutually dependent on each other for their co-existence. In fact, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, do not even exist as individuals; the integrity of their divinity only exists in the context of their relationship. Each member’s fundamental identity is not complete without connection to the other two parts. Or to put it another way, unless all the parts are present, none of them are. A life in relationship with others is not something God chooses, it is what God is: Community.

For centuries, the Christian Church has gone to extraordinary lengths to preserve the image of our God as a community of equals -- not a lonely, powerful individual. Especially in the early centuries of Christianity, groups rose to challenge the mysterious idea of a single God in three persons, each co-equal and co-eternal within the Godhead. Each time these groups appeared, the Church fought to protect the image of a relational God defined by mutual equality.

III.

But, of course, historical doctrines only matter if they remain alive and meaningful in every age. What is the Good News of God as Trinity today? What is the value of imaging God as a community of difference, united in by an unbreakable mutuality?

For me, it’s in the fact that this pretty much describes my experience of the human condition in the 21st century. We live in a world of human differences. Be they racial, linguistic, sexual, geographical, economic, creedal, even, dare I say it, chronological. Like the three persons of the Trinity, human beings are differentiated in recognizable ways. We know that the Father is not the Holy Spirit, the same way that we know a resident of Bedford is not a resident of Moore, Oklahoma, or of Damascus in Syria. And yet despite all the identity differences between us and them, as people of faith we acknowledge a unity that comes from one of our shared identities: we are all children of God, all siblings, no matter how estranged we might imagine ourselves to be from each other.

You see, you and I were created in the image of God. And when I say that, I don’t mean it the way Michaelangelo painted it on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. The image of God that I was created in was not that of a lonely old man reaching through a cloud, but that of a social being – endowed with language, with the capacity for love of my neighbor, with a soul that responds to the needs and the gifts of other people around me. Like the Trinity, I was created not just to share physical space and compete for resources with other people, but to share my soul, my sense of meaning and purpose, to share my sacred being with others.

Being created in the image of the God means being created in the image of Trinity. It means that our most robust sense of self comes not when we assert our ultimate independence by drawing clear lines between us and them, but when we recognize our fundamental interdependence, the bleeding through the boundaries of privilege or poverty or pride or fear.

Some of us had a chance to read part of the “rich and the rest of us” and will gather to discuss it after church today. This book challenges us to work for a society in which those interdependent relationships are marked by a spirit of mutual respect and dignity, rather than one of competition, exploitation, and fear. When each of us engages this work to transform our human community, we are making our own lives closer and closer to the image of God’s own life, in which we were created.

And as we recognize the undeniable relationships we have with every other person, the clear lines around our hearts begin to soften, and we are invited into sacred space together – sacred space among people that reflects the sacred space within God’s very being. AMEN.