

Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church
Trinity Sunday June 16, 2019
“Queer the Trinity”
Psalm 8; John 16:12-15
Rev. Michele Ward

Prayer: God of Silence, we wait for you here. Reveal your truth to us this morning through the power of your Word, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Last week on Pentecost Sunday, we found ourselves in the farewell discourse from the Gospel of John. And today, Trinity Sunday, we continue our journey through the final conversation Jesus has with the 12 disciples before his execution. Jesus has a bad case of what I like to call the ‘long goodbye.’ Do you know anyone who cannot say goodbye? Perhaps they doddle on the phone, wrapping up the conversation for 5 minutes after they have said, “I need to get going...” Do you know someone who cannot leave a dinner party, a coffee hour, a sanctuary for that matter without a prolonged 20 minutes of chatting after their initial comment, “Just one more thing before I go...” This is Jesus with his disciples in this account. Jesus keeps saying to them “And another thing, before I forget!” He goes on for multiple chapters in John’s Gospel, giving them the *Worst Case Scenario Handbook* version of how to prepare for life after he dies and then ascends. He keeps alluding to his impending death, telling them to get ready. But in this particular excerpt, he explains to them how the relationship among God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit acts in the world. He emphasizes that the Holy Spirit doesn’t come in order that they may each have an individual experience of God. Rather, the Spirit reveals themselves through the community of disciples.

But Jesus does not start there. In verse 12 he tells them “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.” The Greek word for *bear* has multiple meanings, usually talking about picking something up or removing something. Jesus tells them that they cannot handle what he has to say, so he does not say it. He is possibly talking about his death, the suffering of martyrdom that he knows is coming for his followers, the betrayal he will experience, the responsibilities they have.

He goes on to tell them that the Holy Spirit will share ‘the truth’ with them--what a weighty statement to make. When John is talking about ‘the truth’ in this account, he is referring to Jesus, whom he calls ‘the way, the truth, and the life.’ Jesus

seems to offer this statement as a comfort to them, but I take it as a challenge. Someone else, the Spirit, someone they have not seen, touched, or heard, will show them who Jesus is? John does not give us a formula for understanding how the relationship between God our Holy Parent, Jesus, God's child, and the Holy Spirit interact. That doesn't come until a few hundred years later. Augustine makes an attempt of unpacking what John is saying in this passage by describing how their relationship functions in the world.

Doctrine of the Trinity [Paraphrase this excerpt of Augustine on John 16:13c: "It is the Father only who is not of another. For the Son is born of the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. But the Father is neither born of, nor proceeds from another. And yet this should not occasion in human thought any idea of disparity in the Supreme Trinity. For the Son is equal to him of whom he is born just as the Holy Spirit is equal to him from whom he proceeds."¹]

John's Gospel does not focus on the relationship of the three persons of the Trinity, which some theologians call the "social Trinity." Rather, John writes about what theologians call "the economic Trinity." The economic Trinity is the way that the Godhead acts in regards to the creation, salvation, and sanctification of the world. The main difference is that John's Gospel cares more about how the persons of the Trinity act in the world rather than how to interact with one another. John talks at length about the Holy Spirit's role interpreting what Jesus tells them. John writes that the Holy Spirit's function is to speak what they hear from God. The Holy Spirit guide the disciples in their search for truth. Never will the Holy Spirit speak apart from the other members of the Trinity. They speak about what will happen after Jesus leaves, interpreting his words and actions. John portrays the relationship of the Trinity this way: Jesus makes humanity know the Father through his life and ministry. The Spirit translates what Jesus says about God to the disciples and to the wider church.² John is concerned about what theologians call the economic Trinity, how the Godhead acts in regards to the world.

The silence of Jesus fascinates us, intrigues us, and leaves more questions than answers in this final teaching session with his disciples. What was Jesus saying in the

¹ Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 99.4, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* 17:382.

² Philip Turner, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary (Year C, Volume 3, Pentecost and Season After Pentecost 1 (Propers 3-16))*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 48.

silence? Perhaps he was telling them the truth--the truth that they are loved, the truth that God will never leave them, the truth that they are bearers of the Spirit wherever they go from that moment on. Perhaps he was leaving room for a truth that does not need words in order for them to understand it. A truth they can know in that place where words fall short.

Frederick Buechner, writer and preacher, wrote a small book in the 1970s called *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, & Fairytale*. This book was written to preachers, but he grapples with deeply human questions about who God is and how we talk about God that many of us can relate to asking. Buechner has this to say about the mystery about telling the truth whenever we speak about God and the good news that Jesus brings. He says that the Gospel is: “the tale that is too good not to be true because to dismiss it as untrue is to dismiss it along with it that catch of breath, that beat and lifting of the heart near to or even accompanied by tears, which ... is the deepest intuition of truth that we have.”³

Buechner is on to something here. He claims that our bodies tell the truth. Our bodies tell the truth about our experiences in the world. Our experiences of God, our experiences of our relationships to our family, our friends, our loves. The whole darn experience we call life--all of that is wrapped up in what he calls that “catch of breath,” that “lifting of the heart.” When Jesus tells the disciples that there are truths waiting for them too much for them to bear, I wonder if he was talking about these kinds of truths--the ones that are so deeply present within us that we can only know them in the silence, in the pause between words, in the whisper of God’s Spirit that we are loved. Jesus tells the disciples that they cannot bear the entirety of the truth, so he withholds from them. He is silent about some issues and direct about others. He does not tell them all the truth of what awaits them.

To be honest, some truths are too hard to bear. The truths of trauma, of suffering, of death too early, or natural disasters, of war. These are too hard to bear. Jesus does not need to communicate these to a colonized and colonizer people like the disciples. They know that they are captive to a system that oppresses them and their families. But they are still learning how to listen to the Spirit in the silence, in the space

³ Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy & Fairytale* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 98.

where the truth is too much to bear. And yet, Jesus bears them. In the silence, Jesus holds what is too hard to bear. And Jesus does that for us, too. When the realities of who we are are too much for us to bear, silence enters. Silence holds the pain, the wounds, the confusion, the beauty, the awe, that is our complicated interior and exterior world. It is no wonder Jesus told the disciples the truth was too much for them to bear in that moment.

Jesus does something here quite profound when he talks of truth, of God, his role, the Spirit. He begins with silence, with the truth that is too much to bear. But he also tells them that it will not be too much for them to bear forever. He uses the word now. It is too much for them to bear now, but in the future, that will not be the case. Their capacity to bear the truth will increase, will grow, will expand. Their understanding of truth and the reality of their lives will grow, so much so that God will reveal the truth to them in a broader sense later. This is such a hopeful word to put at the end of a sentence that might be infuriating or opaque. Just wait, Jesus says, the truth will not be unbearable for long. A time will come when you can hold more, when you can let go of more, when you can carry more, when you can listen more. Just wait.

And then he refers to these interconnected actions in the world that the members of the Trinity take. He does something some theorists refer to as ‘queer-ing.’ To queer something is to intentionally look at it from a lens that obscures or deconstructs the binaries that hold it in place. Queer is “a self-identifying term which can be controversial because it has been used historically as a derogatory term to identify LGBTQ people.”⁴ It has been widely reclaimed by people in the LGBTQ community to represent individuals whose genders and/or sexualities do not conform with dichotomous gender and sexuality categories. Jesus does this through his understanding of truth.

Truth is something he can bear and yet, John tells us that Jesus is the truth. How can the truth be something that Jesus bears while the truth is also the very person of Jesus? Jesus has made relationships that normally would not function together somehow co-exist inside of himself and also within the lives of the disciples. He does this with his description of God the Father existing both within and outside of himself. He does this through his promise of the Holy Spirit coming to take what belongs to Jesus and then declaring it to them. Jesus claims the Spirit has something that he also

⁴ “Common LGBTQ “Definitions” and Terms,” More Light Presbyterians, www.mlp.org.

has, but it is unclear where the Spirit ends and Jesus begins. Jesus can somehow give the Spirit his essence or guidance to declare although they never seem to meet in the presence of the disciples in this conversation.

Somehow, they are united, acting and performing in the world together, as God/Jesus/Spirit, the three in one and the one in three: the fully genderqueer Trinity. The Rev. Dr. Sarah Coakley, theology professor at the University of Cambridge, says this about the Trinity and their relationship: “Twoness, one might say, is divinely ambushed by threeness.”⁵ We could say the same about the Trinity as queer. The Trinity disrupts our hold on binaries by being three rather than two, by being a relationship that includes three persons rather than two persons. The Trinity represents the complexity of what it means to be made of pure connection without judgment or shame, and John lays this out in its beauty.

We see this kind of ‘queer-ing’ in the conversations happening about gender in our current culture. People who do not identify as male or female, but somewhere on the gender spectrum, use terms like ‘genderqueer,’ nonbinary, transgender, and genderfluid to self-identify. Like the Trinity, genderqueer people represent the fullness of who human beings are. We are made in the image of God, a God that is full of complexity and multiple ways of expressing and identifying in the world. Why would our self-expression as people be any different? Of course we would mimic the Trinity in the way we show the world who we are.

John invites us to consider what we hear in the silence of the truths too hard to bear. We are skilled at listening here at Brown. We sat down with families this spring to ask them what they long for from church, what they desire for themselves and for their children to experience and understand about God. We have relationships with communities here in Baltimore and elsewhere--Eutaw Marshburn Elementary School, BUILD, the Upper Sioux Presbytery, the parish of Maria Madre de Los Pobres in El Salvador, and our newest partnership with the Presbyterian Church of Camajuani in Cuba. All of these relationships point to deep listening and action, the kind of action based on an understanding that we are all connected to one another in a mysterious, Trinitarian, some would say, queer way. In our binary world, we have no reason to care about one another. And yet, inexplicably, we understand on a deeper level the truth that

⁵ Sarah Coakley, *God, Sex, and the Trinity*, 58.

is too much to bear--the truth in the silence--that we are somehow all one, somehow how connected to one another through the mystery of God's presence.

And yet, there is deeper listening for us to do. The good news about listening is that it is never 'complete.' We can never show up and say we have listened as much as we need to listen. Listening is more like a spiral rather than moving from point A to point b. We move deeper and deeper into the spiral the longer we listen, discovering more the further we journey together. When we 'queer' the Trinity, we start with a different kind of listening. It is the kind of listening that disturbs binaries, unsettles hetero norms, disrupts patriarchal systems. It is the kind of listening that Buechner talks about in *Telling the Truth*: the kind that shows up in our bodies, in the catch of our breath, in the beating of our hearts. 'Queer-ing' the Trinity allows us to make space for the truths about our city and our world that are too hard to bear. I wonder what kind of truths we would hear if we sat with the disciples and listened to what that silence offers. I wonder what kind of truths we would hear if we followed our queer God into the silences of our friends, our neighbors, our partners. What invitation might we find in the silence?