

The Divine Dance
Proverbs 8.1-4, 22-31 and John 15.26-16.15
Trinity Sunday C
May 22, 2016
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott
St. Charles Ave. Baptist Church

It happens when I walk through my rented, postage stamp yard that we are turning into a secret garden. I count the satsumas growing for their third year in the big, blue pot. I note the fig we planted in the fall has more than doubled in size. The new rosemary grows alongside the old rosemary; the only plant we brought with us from Virginia—a rooting from the giant rosemary bush we planted when our son was born ten years ago. I smile at the raised bed full of zinnias and laugh at the St. Charles Christmas poinsettias that are thriving where the gardenias are withering. And so it goes, in my little haven, all the way around, until I get to the magnificent morning glories that grow along the fence and up into the wildly unkempt trees and weeds of the yard next door. New every morning.

It happened when my children were born—the drama of preeclampsia and hypertension now a foggy memory, the doctors and nurses satisfied with our safety and content to leave us alone for a while—the warm little bundles somehow found their way to that space at my neck just beneath my chin where a violin may go but a baby's head fits better. They knew just where to land, and I knew just how to rest into them. A full body knowing.

It happens when I go for coffee with a friend and no real agenda other than sitting together for a while, and suddenly we're so excited that one thought sparks another, and the stories and ideas are flying. We figure out something new about each other and the world and the church and ourselves. Suddenly, two hours have passed, though it feels like much less. Time flies whenever it's happening.

It always happens, without fail, when I take my morning walk in Audubon Park and turn that corner where the live oaks meet across the path. Each and every time it is as though I have discovered this sacred space for the first time, and each and every time I feel as though the trees have been waiting for me—holding that space for anyone who realizes their need of it. Someone else noticed this long before because they placed a bench right there in the middle facing that great, old tree who stands so powerfully over the path—rooted, arms going out gracefully in every direction, holding strong to the place she is planted yet her impact stretching far beyond her body.

It happened the first time I stepped onto this campus and looked you in the eyes, the first time I stepped into this pulpit and told an old, old story. The first time you began to open up and share with me what this place means to you. You whispered that times had been hard for a little while, but hope and vision and energy were still alive. I felt it happening over coffee in the fellowship hall and as you asked questions of me in the chapel, and as we read together from Jeremiah in worship on that September morning.

When do you feel it happen? When do you sense that time has almost stopped being time, and you are lost to a moment, an exchange, a sacred and favorite place, an encounter with the people and the physical world around you? When do you feel that five minutes has passed but really it's been an hour? Where are you when you feel that pulsing calm within that says, "All is as it should be." If you can't think of a single time, then pay attention to your words: I got swept away, I felt I was in the midst of something bigger than myself, I was so focused I just lost track of time, I was in a groove. What is it that happens? What is this flow, this groove, this experience of being simultaneously fully here and deeply connected yet also above and beyond the daily world that we know?

I believe that these are the moments of experiencing the Divine in ways we often do not connect to the essence of faith—holy moments that are both intimately of the earth and this life while somehow beyond time and place and words. As a culture, we have falsely come to believe that religion, what happens in here, is irrelevant to our ordinary lives. Rather than bridging the popular separation between religion and spirituality, clergy have too often maintained a wall between the two. Clergy of all sorts teach an expression of God that is detached from our lives and exists only within a particular time and space—a God that comes out of a little box nestled in the wall and then goes back behind the closed door again. What I am talking about this morning isn't contained, isn't under the supervision and protection of the clergy, and isn't simply a glimpse of heaven or a touch from God. This is Trinity—Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer; Father, Son, Holy Spirit; God in three persons. And it isn't a concept, it is a reality we experience.

While ordinary people, focused on the groceries and the taxes and raising good kids, aren't terribly interested in debating the doctrine of the Trinity, the reality of the Trinity is essential to an ordinary life. Richard Rohr notes¹, "The normal Christian image of God is still pagan; it's still Zeus—a man with a white beard sitting on a throne." Consequently, Rohr notes, "Dropping the concept of Trinity really changes very little for

¹ Robcast 86 | Richard Rohr and the Alternative Orthodoxy, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ij3h6-GNsvU> or <http://robbell.podbean.com/e/episode-86-richard-rohr-and-the-alternative-orthodoxy/>

most Christian practice today.” What we have is a static, pagan notion of a distant God on a throne who sometimes gets involved in our lives but is largely separate from us. And yet, the much older concept of God is a Divine movement or flow that we enter into.² Richard Rohr, Rob Bell, Leonardo Boff and many others are all writing and teaching about this centuries old understanding of God that we have experienced but not articulated.

Among these writers, Danut Manastireanu points to “The fourth-century Cappadocian Fathers [who] tried to communicate this notion of life as mutual participation by calling the Trinitarian flow a ‘circle dance’ (*perichoresis*) between the three. They were saying that whatever is going on in God is a flow that’s like a dance; and God is not just the dancer, God is the dance itself! The Incarnation is a movement—Jesus comes forth from the Father and the Holy Spirit to take us back with him into this eternal embrace, from which we first came (John 14:3). We are invited to join in the dance and have participatory knowledge of God through the Trinity.

Trinity is the very nature of God, and this God is a circle dance, a centrifugal force flowing outward, and then drawing all things into the dance centripetally. If this God names himself/herself in creation and in reality then there must be a ‘family resemblance’ between everything else and the nature of the heart of God.”

We hear this clearly in Proverbs 8, read by Linda earlier. Wisdom dances alongside God the creator, God’s handiwork is everywhere and in everything. In co-creation there is delight and rejoicing in the process of creation, in the partnership between dimensions of God, and in the world and people who have been created.

Manastireanu adds, “Scientists are discovering this reality as they look through microscopes and telescopes. They are finding that the energy is in the space *between* the particles of the atom and *between* the planets and the stars. They are discovering that reality is absolutely relational at all levels. When you really understand Trinity, however slightly, it’s like you live in a different universe. And a very good and inviting one!”³

According to John 16, the Spirit continues to reveal Truth. “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear it all now,” Jesus says, “but the Spirit of Truth is

² Some thoughts here were sparked by Rob Bell and Richard Rohr in their 90 minute conversation. It is worth following the links and listening to hear their lively discussion. I have not quoted directly in every case but want to attribute the pagan God vs. Trinity flow to hearing their podcast on April 11, 2016.

³ <https://danutm.wordpress.com/2014/08/20/richard-rohr-the-trinity-as-a-circle-dance/>

coming to make sense of these things and will continue speaking to you.” The being of God, this dancing flow, continues to reveal Truth to us. This experience of a triune God is for now. We are invited to wake up to this way right here.

I find this teaching terribly exciting, and so I was initially surprised by how many clergy I watched on social media, in particular a private sermon-brainstorming group of 3400 people, have shared their struggles with today’s Trinity sermon. Some punted the text altogether and decided to move lightly with the Wisdom of Proverbs or the more palatable teaching of noticing God’s handiwork in all of creation. One lamented, “So hard to write about Trinity without sounding like a heretic,” while another shared, “Don’t say ‘perichoresis!’”—the Greek word for this notion of swirling, collaborative relationship of God, Jesus, and Spirit as circle dance. If Richard Rohr is right and our concept of God is still largely pagan and not particularly Trinitarian, then teaching anything else feels threatening and even dangerous because it sounds too new.

Opening ourselves up to a different way of understanding who God is and how God moves in this world can be frightening because it necessarily requires us to then open ourselves up to a different way of understanding who we are. But let’s do the work and go back to writing and teaching and art across the centuries—the orthodox, mainstream teaching of the first 400 years of church—and open ourselves up to a bigger, richer, and wilder expression of Trinity. If we do so, then we change the question we are asking in this place every week. Rob Bell says the question changes from, “Do you believe or not,” to “Would you like to enter into a flow?” One is about informational data with an implied provability and the other is about experiencing life with dynamic, robust awareness.

Necessarily, we then relinquish all that old talk about belonging to the right tribe or measuring who is in and who is out. Instead we talk about waking up to our lives, noticing God’s fingerprints everywhere in the world around us, and entering into the movement of God that extends into all corners of the world.

Early church fathers went so far as to teach that we, the creation, are the 4th person of the Trinity and taken into the flow of God. Therefore, in Rohr’s words, the universe is benevolent. God is not someone to be afraid of but is the ground of being and is on our side. God is moving and dancing all around, God is mending and repairing what is broken, and God is inviting us into that energetic flow just as Wisdom is invited in Proverbs to co-create and delight with God.

A fascinating visual is before you in the famous Russian icon by Andrei Rublev⁴; a work of art dedicated to the delighting relationship of the Trinity. See the little square at the bottom of the table presumably at its fourth side? Art historians who have studied this piece noted signs of either repair or damage based on evidence of glue layered with paint on the original icon. Some now think there is reason to believe the icon once held a mirror at the empty space beneath the Trinity. Why might that be? What invitation would that signal as we look into this 15th century image of God in three persons?

As you look upon them this morning, hear that invitation extended to you. You are invited into the movement, into the dance, into the flow. May you release the notion that God is far off and unreachable. May you embrace the presence and reality of God in large and small moments. May you believe that you are invited and swept up into the movement of God. It happens all the time. May you name it and know it and awaken to the reality of the Divine Dance that welcomes you to fullness of life.

Amen.

⁴ This teaching also comes from Richard Rohr and will be featured in his book *The Divine Dance: Exploring the Mystery of the Trinity* to be released in October 2016.