

Draw Near to God and God Will Draw Near to You
Second in a three part sermon series on *Holy Trinity: What's In Our Name?*

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James 3:13 - 4:3, 7 – 8a

¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. ¹⁴But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. ¹⁵Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. ¹⁶For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ²You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. ³You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. ⁷Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and the devil will flee from you. ⁸Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.

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Holy Trinity: What's In Our Name? That is our topic for reflection during this 3 part sermon series on the Trinity, which I explained last week, was inspired by my pilgrimage to the Abbey last June, at the very beginning of my renewal leave. The Abbey is located on Iona, a beautiful little island, which is part of the Scotland's southern Hebrides islands. To get there is a pilgrimage in itself. From Boston I flew into London and from there took a flight to Edinburgh. That same day I caught a train to Glasgow and then took a bus to Oban, a beautiful town on the west coast of Scotland that serves as a port for fishing and ferries. After an overnight in Oban, I caught a ferry to the Isle of Mull. It was on that ferry ride that I began to meet others who were heading to Iona for the week. Once on Mull, a bus transported us the length of the island where we caught the ferry to the Isle of Iona. I realized how much we all must want to be on this pilgrimage when I considered the trek to get there!

And it was during my week's pilgrimage that I was introduced to Celtic spirituality, a tradition that dates back to the 2nd century and one which is Trinitarian based. All of our prayers, all of our liturgies were offered on behalf of the Trinity – God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. And it was that experience that inspired me to invite us all to think about that for which we as a church are named.....Holy Trinity!

Last week, we began the series with Jesus and spent time responding to his question “Who do you say that I am?” We named a variety of ways that we know Jesus – as our teacher, healer, peacemaker, savior, friend. And the gospel lesson moved us to think about Jesus as Messiah. With Peter, we had to unpack the meaning of Jesus, the Messiah, and accept that it meant that he was a sufferer, one who suffered and gave up his life for the sins of the world, so that our relationship with God might be once again restored. And we heard how he asked us to do the same, to suffer for and with those for whom he suffered. It means picking up a cross, choosing to sacrifice and deny ourselves, dying to a self-centered way of living and being resurrected into new life that chooses to walk in Jesus’ way. We even sang and practiced just such a walk.

Today we turn to a second person in the Trinity as we focus our reflections on God. Already the children have helped us think about how we name God and what qualities and characteristics we give to the Divine. This past summer I read an interesting book by Diana Butler Bass titled *A People’s History of Christianity*. I was particularly struck by how our understanding of God has changed throughout the history of Christianity. Bass summarizes this nicely when she writes:

Medieval people knew where God was – the Father sat on the high throne in heaven, was mysteriously present in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, and was manifested through the authority of the church. They took literally the words of Jesus’ prayer, “Our Father, who art in heaven.” As the Reformation fractured this traditional arrangement, God appeared to move away from familiar (heavenly) spiritual geography, leaving modern people to relocate the divine...An overarching question was achingly simple: “Where is God?”

Since God could no longer be assumed, modern devotional quests sought to answer this question and find God. In order to find God, people had to determine what the divine might look like...modern people found God to be more ineffable and less physical than had medieval Christians...Light became a primary descriptor for divine things in the early modern period (Bass, pp. 221-222).

Bass goes on to describe the various Christian traditions and their use of light. For the Quakers and George Fox, the Inner Light formed the heart of their community. We, who call ourselves Methodists, relate to John Wesley’s belief that people are innately sinful and need God to imbue them with light through an experiential encounter with Christ. For Wesley, Christ resides in the hearts of those who have been renewed through the waters of baptism and an experience of one’s heart being “strangely warmed.” Then there were the transcendentalists, who found the light of God in all of nature. A popular contemporary answer to the question “Where is God?” is that God is found in all denominations and all religions, a kind of universal light shining through the varieties of faith.

Each of us has had a journey of faith and hopefully, like the History of Christianity, our understanding of God has evolved over time. For me, personally, I have come to believe simply that God is love. And because God is love, that Love informs everything that I believe about God. It defines God’s character. It defines God’s intentions. It helps me discern what is OF God and what is NOT of God.

Like many of you, I read Paul Young's bestseller, *The Shack*. In fact, I remember referring to it last May on Pentecost Sunday. There is something stimulating, controversial and inviting about Young's depiction of the members of the Trinity. He invites the reader to wrestle with the question "Who is the Trinity?" and more specifically, "Who is God?"

For those of you who have not read *The Shack* let me explain that the book begins with a rather gruesome abduction and murder of a young girl. Mackensie (who is known as Mack throughout the book) is the girl's father and he experiences this incredible loss which is referred to as *The Great Sadness* throughout the book. On a return trip to the shack where his daughter, Missy, was murdered, Mack is "taken up" into a revelatory, visionary experience in which he spends a few days with the holy Trinity. He meets God, whose name is Elousia. She is a large African-American woman who is called Papa. God tells Mack, "For me to appear to you as a woman and suggest that you call me 'Papa' is simply to mix metaphors, to help you keep from falling so easily back into your religious conditioning (*The Shack*, p. 95). She further explains that her name, Elousia, comes from *El*, the name of Creator God and *Ousia*, which means 'being' or 'that which is truly real.' So her name means 'the Creator God who is truly real and the ground of all being' (p. 112). Elousia hangs out with Jesus, a Middle Eastern looking man and Sarayu, the Holy Spirit, who is an Asian woman. Together these three help Mack work through his anger at Missy's senseless death, his growing disbelief in a God who would allow such terrible things to happen, and his hatred toward the man who murdered his daughter, all the while, rethinking his understanding of God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

Throughout the pages of the book, Papa and Jesus and Sarayu model unity. They are in a circle of relationship, not a chain of command. They have no concept of authority among them, only the sharing of life. "We don't need power over the other because we are always looking out for the best. Hierarchy would make no sense among us" (p. 125) they explain to Mack. "Well, which one of you is God?" Mack asks. "I am," all three say in unison (p. 89).

What does this three-in-one God teach us about God's character? God's intentions?

"I am love" explains Papa. "And everything that I do emanates out of that love. My love does not test nor punish. I don't need to punish people for sin," speaks Elousia. "Sin is its own punishment, devouring people from the inside. It's not my purpose to punish; it's my joy to cure" (p. 122) This God wants only wholeness and healing, the abundance of life for all of her creatures.

Similarly, God doesn't cause pain nor inflict evil. If God is love, such intentions are impossible. But Mack blames God for Missy's death. As I reread *The Shack* this week and simultaneously read the headlines in the daily news, I concluded that Missy's abduction and murder were all too similar to the recent horrific murder of Yale student, Annie Le whose body was discovered stuffed behind the wall of a research building on the Yale campus last Sunday.

How can a God of love allow such heinous crimes to happen? The Holy Spirit tries to explain to Mack that God doesn't stop things that cause even God great pain. The world is broken. Nothing is as it should be, as Papa desires it to be and as it will be one day. The world is lost in darkness and chaos and horrible things happen to those that God is especially fond of (p. 166). God gave humans the gift of freedom, of free will. Humans have misused that gift and embraced evil instead of good. What happened to Missy, what happened to Annie Le was the work of evil and no one in our world is immune from it.

God doesn't orchestrate such tragedies but God works incredible good out of the most difficult situations. "Grace doesn't depend on suffering to exist, but where there is suffering you will find grace in many facets and colors." Many of you who have experienced tragedy and suffering and pain in your life could give your own witness to this truth.

God also reminds Mack that she never abandoned him, even though Mack blamed God for Missy's murder. Mack finds this hard to believe and reminds God about the final scene of Jesus on the cross. "You left Jesus on the cross" accuses Mack. "Jesus even said 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?'" This was a scripture that had often haunted Mack in *the Great Sadness*.

"Oh," replies God, "you misunderstand the mystery there. Regardless of what Jesus felt at that moment, I never left him. I never left him and I never left you. When all you can see is your pain, perhaps then you lose sight of me?" God suggests to Mack.

And so Mack's journey is all about re-turning to God. It's a journey that we've all taken at some time or another. To remember that God is love, to know that God doesn't cause bad things to happen, to trust that God never abandons us but that God's spirit is always with us and within us is to return to God, to turn back to the One who loves us.

The Trinity helps unbind Mack of all of his misconceptions and misunderstandings about God's nature. He is like Lazarus, called out of the tomb. It is as if the Trinity collectively say "Unbind him so that he can love and live and forgive once again." I pray that Annie Le's family and fiancé and friends can, in time, have a similar experience with Divine Love and find ways to return to the God who is with them, a God who can help them turn this tragedy into healing and hope for themselves and others.

This morning's scripture lesson from James reminds us that when we return to God, God is there for us. It is God's wisdom that needs to be at the heart of our lives for that wisdom teaches us how to be peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. We are invited to submit ourselves to this God of love. Draw near to God and God will draw near to you. And remember, when your pain is so great, when your suffering is so overwhelming that you lose sight of God, be assured that the God of love is still with you – always and everywhere God is with you. Thanks be to this God. Alleluia! Amen!

