

The Trinity Trap

Psalm 8

Romans 5: 1-5

Proverbs 8: 1-9 and 22-31

Our community has been reeling this past week from the occurrence of three deaths that touched this church congregation especially closely. And as we came together at three different times in three different churches to mourn our losses and to grieve together, we also have seen how closely our lives are intertwined.

Our dear Betsy Komline passed away last Sunday afternoon. She was 93 and had lived a long and blessed life for which she was joyfully thankful. The funeral service for Betsy was here in this sanctuary on Friday. But last Sunday morning, I learned of the death of Jack Turpin, a well-known name around here, the president of Turpin Realtors. Jack and Marge weren't members of this church, but his grandchildren attend the Cottage School here; and Bill Muller works at Turpin Realty; and Barry Thomson, Ruth's son, has written two books in partnership with Jack. On Wednesday, when I went to the funeral service at St. Bernard's Episcopal Church in Bernardsville, where there was an overflow crowd and about 200 of us had to stand in the parking lot outside, I conversed quietly with several members of this congregation who were there. And I told them of yet another death. Chris Komline, one of Betsy's sons, had informed me that morning that Bill Tiger had died suddenly. Bill and his brother John grew up in Peapack-Gladstone, and they're still members of this town's fire department; their mother Mary's funeral was my first as your pastor. Bill Tiger worked for the Komline family business – Komline-Sanderson, in Peapack – which is how Chris Komline knew about Bill's death so quickly.

Whoever it was I was talking with on Wednesday at St. Bernard's – Barry Thomson or Bill Muller probably – commented that events in life – often tragic events - seem to come in threes. Not always, but often. Of course, we aren't so caught up in superstition that we expect that when one bad thing happens, two more are sure to follow. Yet there can be something ominous about the number three...

Today is Trinity Sunday and the concept of three appears throughout the service: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. There is nothing ominous about this triad. Instead we consider the interrelated beauty of three that produces symmetry, balance, and strength.

But it is when one of the elements goes haywire that the trinity loses its intrinsic goodness.

Consider Psalm 8, our Call to Worship. Psalm 8 celebrates God the Father Creator, and his creatures: *When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars that you have established, what are human beings that you are mindful of them...Yet you have made them a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet.*

But what happens when we substitute 'license' for 'dominion' and run carelessly rampant over our natural resources and show no respect for one another as God's children? When we begin to actually think of ourselves as pretty close to Godlike? When we lose our sense of awe and wonder at creation and get heavy-handed with having dominion?

Sin finds its way into creation and the symmetry of Trinity is destroyed.

Consider the passage from Romans. Paul is talking about God the Son, Jesus the Christ, the Redeemer. *Since we are justified by faith [in Christ] – that is, set back into right relationship with God because of Jesus’ death on the cross – we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.* Paul goes on to say that even though we may suffer – and we all will – suffering ultimately produces hope because God loves us.

But what happens when suffering takes us in the other direction? When we can’t bear it and we become embittered and angry or buried in sadness? What would life be like for the Komline and Turpin and Tiger families if they did not begin to see light through the clouds of grief, if they were not reminded of the promise of sharing the glory of God in the life to come, the life which Betsy and Jack and Bill have now entered into?

Hopelessness finds its way into the soul and the strength of Trinity collapses.

Finally consider the fascinating poetry of Proverbs. The voice of woman Wisdom is the voice of the Holy Spirit, present from the very beginning of time with God the Creator: *The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago...When he established the heavens I was there...when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him...rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.*

And Wisdom is with us still, in all the important places, everywhere that matters: *On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroad she takes her stand; beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out.* Jesus lives on as the Holy Spirit. God is present and active among us as the Holy Spirit. In every decision we make, in every endeavor we undertake, Wisdom calls to us to pay attention to her words of prudence, intelligence and noble thoughts.

Why then, do we pretend to be deaf? Why do we insist on having our own way instead of listening to Wisdom? Why do we always have to be right or to be in control? Why are we stupid and selfish? Why are we greedy or dismissive of others? Why, when we know better; when we know what God expects of us?

Once again, sin intrudes upon our nice, pleasant life and the balance of Trinity is thrown off.

I've called this dilemma the Trinity trap – how sinfulness has a way of destroying the beauty of the triad. But actually, it is in breaking out of the Trinity that we become entrapped in a web of destructive ways. Living within God's Trinity is like living in an island of peace surrounded by chaos.

Another way to visualize this is to notice the artwork at the top of the bulletin or our stained glass window in the balcony. You see the triangle, the Trinity, in a circle of words and overlaid with intersecting circles (or, in the window, the triangles enclosed in a circular frame). This is the surrounding circle of God's love. It has no beginning and no end; God is Alpha and Omega. Out of love, God created the world; out of love, God has redeemed the world through Jesus Christ; and out of love, God sustains the world by the presence of the Holy Spirit. And God commands us, expects

us, and hopes for us that we love God above all else and our neighbors as our selves. Jesus said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

In those familiar verses from Chapter 13 of First Corinthians, Paul reminds us what love is like: *Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.*

Love keeps us safely encircled within the Trinity.

Paul also reminds us of something else, in a passage from Romans that is often read at funerals, and indeed was read at least once this past week: *I am convinced, Paul writes, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.* God has hold of us coming and going.

Living within the Trinity, surrounded by God’s love is no trap at all, but instead true freedom.

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