

Sermon on Matthew 28:16-20; Genesis 1:1-2:4
Holy Trinity Sunday, June 7, 2020
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Dear friends, grace and peace to you in the name of God, who has created us all, who came in Jesus to save the whole world, and sustains us in all our trials. If there ever were a time for us to call on God, for a savior who will come save us, and be with us in adversity, this is it! Amen!

These days our attention is focused on the numbers: it is Trinity Sunday, so we think of how Christians worship one God in three persons – Three-in-One, One in Three. If that’s not confusing enough, consider how it is now 2020, a number that doesn’t just mean perfect 20-20 vision, it also names a year that has been harrowing for all of us – with this global COVID-19 pandemic (ah, another number!), and much of the world has been essentially shut down for months. 2020 is also a presidential election year, and we all know what that means! 2020 is the year that some hoped that we would have “solved” the poverty dilemma in America. Well, how’s that going? Just yesterday the U.S. Senate *finally passed a bill making lynching a federal crime*, legislation they have tried and failed to pass since 1882, over 4,700 lynchings too late – but at least it was unanimous. We’ll see if it becomes law, if it can get to the House before they adjourn next week. Then there are the familiar scripture passages we read today, from the Creation story in Genesis chapter 1, to the beloved creation Psalm 8, and Jesus’ Great Commission in Matthew 28. But today we are not inspired so much by these numbers as we are haunted by the numbers 8:46 – the eight minutes and 46 seconds for which a Minneapolis police officer had his knee on George Floyd’s neck. That’s a long time. Have you had enough of numbers yet?

So as we come together to worship and pray this morning, we are living in the midst of a global pandemic from the coronavirus, we look with dread at the coming prospects of climate change, and are living with the lid blown off of a simmering, boiling kettle of rage and grief, after the murder of George Floyd last week by police, exposing this bitter soup of racism and oppression, hatred and fear - all symbolized by one white police officer with his knee on a handcuffed black man’s neck. The rage all exploded in a week of protests and burning, fueled by those who would rather see a race war than racial reconciliation. Though we are just at the beginning of our struggle to bring justice to our community, we are all worn out. We all could use a bit of a breather – except then we realize, the whole painful thing started with a man pleading “*I can’t breathe*”. Calling for his mama.

So this is the context into which we come today, reading scriptures from Genesis of God’s creation of the world, paired with Jesus’ Great Commission to

his disciples. It's a challenge to tell the world the story how God made us all out of love, when the picture so many see is how so much has been unexpectedly destroyed. The whole world seems a sick, psychotic mess, and it's hard to pick out the stories of compassion and love that surely are there, when cities are burning and people are out in the streets, dodging tear gas and mace. Humankind is hyperventilating - and pastors are expected to preach an inspiring sermon about the Holy Trinity? If that's all there is, your God is too small. I protest!

For as almost any preacher will tell you, the Feast of the Holy Trinity is one of the hardest Sundays on which to preach - because it's not based on a story or event. It doesn't "preach", because if you approach it like a "doctrine", or a formula in which to describe God, it then becomes a lecture. For who can really define the infinite God, who goes beyond words or our finite capacity to comprehend her - the divine "She" which defies gender. The only possible way to approach the Trinity, in my view, is to see the Trinity as a *metaphor* - but please, let's go beyond the old, reliable trinitarian metaphor that *ice, water, and steam are all H2O*. This is not the way - to sneak elementary science into theology!

But if you approach the Trinity in another way, as a metaphor to expand our far too limited view of a God "just small enough" to fit into our limited brain capacity or imaginations, we will find that we can start to imagine a Creator so powerful as to create a whole universe with a word, and to create you and me in God's own image. You can imagine a divine God who is also human, willing to come down from heaven and walk with us, and vulnerable enough to suffer and die a humiliating death on a cross, so that we can all know God's mercy and love. Then you need more words, you need poetry, and more images than one culture or religion can fathom. With expanded imagery, you can also see examples of God who is like the rushing of a violent wind, who cannot be contained, like a burning bush, or a burning fire, and the breathe of God that creates life and whispers faith. For this is what moved those early Christians, who had been brought up in the faith in one God, nurtured by the Hebrew scriptures, but challenged by all that they witnessed in Jesus' life and teaching, his death and his rising on Easter. And then on Pentecost, to see God as so much more, exploding the boundaries of their very human minds. The Trinity sets off our imaginations with new pictures of God, which can never be enough, because it's only a start! So our Creeds give us words, from the Apostles' Creed written over three centuries after Christ, to the Nicene, the Athanasian, and the 20th century's Masai Creed, with a whole new picture of God translated by Roman Catholic missionaries into African imagery. But what if we dared hear the words that Masai people in Africa have for God?

But as Jesus said to his disciples in the gospel, we have a mission from God, to tell the story of God's love for the whole world, for every human being. So here is where I will take my cue. The Church (the Body of Christ) still has a crucial

message to preach, even when it seems that the world is not listening to us, caught up, as we are, with marches and demonstrations, and politicians fanning the flames or placing blame. It may not be a doctrine of the Trinity that is so inspiring, but we have a story to tell about the love, mercy and power of God, in the face of all that is evil, hateful and demeaning that has happened in the past two weeks. As many take a pause out of simple exhaustion and mental fatigue, maybe some will hear the words that God is speaking through the acts of love and compassion so many human beings are doing in the aftermath of all that rage.

For today we have heard that ageless tale of creation from Genesis, which means *In the beginning*...when God created the world out of nothing, out of a formless void. When all was darkness, God created light with just a word. How awesome is that – though we are so used to hearing it that it has lost all effect? We were reminded today in our first lesson how God spoke, and the world came to be, all that is beautiful and life-giving – mountains and seas, the sky and the deep, vegetation and creatures of all kinds. **There is no limit to God's power.** And then God said, *“Let us make humankind in our image. So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply.”*

Did you hear that? Human beings are created in the image of God. “Mirrors” of God, that’s what we are. God didn’t say SOME superior people were created in God’s image. Every human being is created in God’s image. People of all nations, and every skin color, we assume – because “race” hadn’t been invented yet when the Bible was written. “Race” was an invention of white Europeans just a few hundred years ago, when they needed false scientific and “theological” rationales for enslaving the masses of brown and black-sinned people who stood in their way of power and profit. So we understand from the Bible that a black man named George Floyd was made in the image of God, which means his or any senseless murder is an offense against God. So the people cry out *black lives matter* as a lament – not because other lives don’t matter, *but because they have to scream it to get our attention* that black and brown lives do matter – in a society that says white lives matter most (which is heresy). Have I said anything untrue?

So one thing that today’s scripture from Genesis makes clear is this: those who see the world with white supremacist eyes and look down on all others as inferior, have based their worldview on a false argument, which goes against scripture. We have to say this loud and clear. Every human being, regardless of difference, is our brother or sister. When Nazis and white power evangelists spread their hate, we have the truth of the gospel and all the holy scriptures to refute them, and so we must speak up. And in response to such hate, we have God’s own words of blessing, as “God blessed all whom God had made.”

For all of this we praise God, as we do in Psalm 8, not only for the power in God's creating this world, but that this all-powerful Creator looks upon and thinks about the mortal human beings God has made. Why should God do that? Because of love. God made human beings little less than divine, and crowned us with glory and honor, to care for the world that God has made. Not some, ALL human beings. Not only those with certain intellectual gifts or physical attributes, but every human being God has made shares in the calling to care for God's creation. God made you! And every human being is your brother or sister! So we praise God and tell others how majestic is God's name in all the earth! To the God of all Creation, to this God of love, every president or ruler on earth must bow, for the most powerful human pales in comparison, and must bend their knee – before God, and not on other people's necks. And we must defy and oppose any person, politician or president who says otherwise, with this gospel. Am I being clear?

So back to the gospel of Matthew. After Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to his disciples, he met them in Galilee on a mountain. They worshiped him, though some doubted. So he said, all authority in heaven and on earth had been given to him. *Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*"

So we have a mission, you and I. That is to teach others what Jesus taught us: to *"love the Lord with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself."* Teach by loving actions, and sometimes use words! Hating your neighbor is not an option. Now, this takes self-control. This takes discipline. This requires love, which is a gift from God. But even though this kind of love is hard, we should never be discouraged, because Jesus said he is with us always, to the end of the age.

At the close of his 2nd letter to the church in Corinth, which had so many issues dividing their people, the apostle Paul told them to put things in order and agree with one another: *"live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you."* As we see in the aftermath of so much turmoil in this and so many cities in America, we must find a way to live with each other, with love, or we will kill each other. So we pray that we will learn to live in peace, with love for one another, and so glorify the God who made us, came to save us, and loves us all forever – to the end of the age. Thanks be to God. Amen.