

*God with Us: The Trinity Within*

John 14:15-23

June 18, 2023

Rev. Jen Brothers

It's great to be with you today. This is actually my third time inside your church. The first two visits were all day affairs when I facilitated the Adaptive Church Project in your beautiful library. I always begin that workshop with a question to discern the boundaries of what we can say and do in the system we are becoming. I usually ask participants to share two things they want us to know about them, and one thing they don't. But when I was here last month, I decided to try a new question—one that had recently shaken me up when I read it in an article. The question was: who were you before the world changed you? And how, with God's help and mercy, do we get back there? I've been thinking about the question since, because I think it's important. But it's also fuzzy. It's difficult to pinpoint when the world began to change us—I mean, change is a constant in life. So today I want to ask you to consider a more specific version of this question, and, yes, I am going to give you a few minutes to discuss it with the people around you.

Who were you before the pandemic, before George Floyd's murder, before #metoo?

*Pause*

A broader way to ask this question is who were you before certain events revealed there were forces larger than you impacting how you behave and think—what you see and what you don't see? In a piece for the New York Times this past week a couple's therapist writes about how our national conversations about power and privilege has impacted her work with couples. She says, and I quote:

*My patients, regardless of political affiliation, are incorporating the messages of social movements into the very structure of their being. New words make new thoughts and feelings possible. As a collective we appear to be coming around to the idea that bigger social forces run through us, animating us and pitting us against one another, whatever our conscious intentions (New York Times, May 16, 2023).*

You feel this, don't you? I know I do. Like the therapist I am grateful for the new vocabulary and the ever-expanding awareness that bigger forces influence our priorities, our habits, and our beliefs. But we can also feel very small before the systems that have been unveiled. And we can become overwhelmed by the division that results from seeing and naming them. Friendships have been lost, families have been divided, communities have been further torn apart. This moment feels new, but when I turn to scripture, I find that it isn't. Jesus constantly challenged the systems that kept people from thriving. He created tension. He also brought good news to the poor and disenfranchised. He created a beloved community of outcasts. And God's kingdom grew. Friends, receive the good news—the same spirit that was in Christ is with us. Not only that, but the whole system that is the Trinity comes to dwell within us with a love bigger than anything in its way.

Receive this message the ancients have left us. A reading from John's gospel, chapter 14:15-23

15 “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 I will ask the Father, and he will send another Companion, who will be with you forever. 17 This Companion is the Spirit of Truth, whom the world can’t receive because it neither sees him nor recognizes him. You know him, because he lives with you and will be with you.

18 “I won’t leave you as orphans. I will come to you. 19 Soon the world will no longer see me, but you will see me. Because I live, you will live too. 20 **On that day you will know that I am in my Father, you are in me, and I am in you.** 21 Whoever has my commandments and keeps them loves me. Whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.”

22 Judas (not Judas Iscariot) asked, “Lord, why are you about to reveal yourself to us and not to the world?”

23 Jesus answered, **“Whoever loves me will keep my word. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.**

The passage we just heard comes from Jesus’ last meal with his disciples. This is the meal where he lovingly washes their feet and tells them to do the same for others. Then the conversation turns dark. *One of you is about to betray me, he says, and where I am going you cannot follow.*

In John’s gospel, Jesus is fully aware that he is going away. His disciples have experienced abundant life with him—they are naturally afraid of what his departure will mean. But Jesus assures them he will not leave them orphaned. The same spirit that descended upon Jesus at his baptism will descend upon them, enabling them to keep the truth of Jesus present despite his departure.

Even though this is a radical thought, it shouldn’t be new to us. Christians have long held that Jesus’ mission is sustained through his followers on earth as they follow the Spirit. But what Jesus says next, I’ve somehow not absorbed until recently, and, it’s curious, because he says it twice in this short passage: since Jesus shares his life with God and the Spirit, his disciples, who live in and through him, will be grafted into that same union—*I in my Father, you in me, and I in you.* So, in addition to Jesus sending the Spirit to his followers, the entire Trinity, Creator, Redeemer, and Way-maker, comes to dwell within us.

I just want to pause for a moment. Have you ever considered this possibility—that the Trinity isn’t just external to you, but seeks to make a home within you? The mystery, the wonder, the possibility, the system of the Trinity, dwelling within you, and me, and everyone. Let’s breathe this good news in!

The Trinity is not an idea to worship and it’s not a doctrine to defend. John’s gospel claims that God in three persons, with three separate but equal functions, not only exists, but seeks to take up residence within us.

Let’s sit this possibility beside the fear and bad news that seems to come at us from every direction. Let’s move it closer to our struggle to live lives worthy of our humanity. Let’s bring it closer still to the challenge of finding God’s image in others and in ourselves. If we dare take Jesus at his word, our sense of ourselves, of each other, and of what’s possible in this world changes.

Like the character of Nicodemus who shows up earlier in John's gospel, I find myself astounded. How can these things be? How can mere mortals—so fallible, so challenged, so lost so often—become the dwelling place of the Trinity? The condition for this divine trinitarian co-habitation is right here in our text. Love. Loving the Three-in-One's commandment to love others as the Three-in-One loves us. I'm going to get to the loving others part, but first we need to be clear about how God loves us, because God does not ask us to share what isn't already ours.

It's very easy to become confused about how God loves us—even to miss the point entirely. The world packages and sells all manner of substitutes for love. John's gospel sums it up with this line: *For God so loved the world God gave God's only so that all would have abundant life.* (John 3:16, paraphrased). This is love that makes life better, here and now. It's love that loves first, no matter who we are, what we have done, or what we will do. God doesn't wait for you to love God before God loves you, wholly, and unconditionally. You cannot earn this love. It is as free, as essential, and as available as the air we breathe. You are loved without reason, without limit, without fear. Breathe that in.

And breathe it out. This is how we are called to love others as we walk through this world that God so very loves. By loving others first, even when they haven't asked for it—when they don't deserve it—when they are difficult—when they've failed to love us as we needed. It's difficult to lean into loving those who don't want to love us back. It's so challenging to love those who stand in our way. We are wounded, scarred, and scared. But here's a secret: we don't have to feel love towards another to lean into the practice of love. Because the love I'm talking about isn't a feeling. It's a choice of the will. If we remember what Jesus said—not that God loves us *if* we love others—we already have God's abundant love—but that the Holy Three-in-One seek to nest within those who desire to embody Jesus' lay-down-your-life-for-another love, it changes things, doesn't it? I mean, imagine what life can be with this trinitarian system influencing our behavior, our thoughts, and our priorities?

Now, I need to make a disclaimer. There are real threats, real people and real situations that need protection. If someone is causing you or a loved one physical or emotional harm, you need boundaries to keep everyone safe. Lay-down-your-life-for-another love doesn't mean becoming a doormat for abuse. And it isn't filling up everyone's bucket while your own becomes depleted. Remember, Jesus also said love your neighbor as yourself.

Where abuse is not present, where we aren't in danger, then lay-down-your-life-for-another-love is the practice of giving others what we want to receive: the benefit of the doubt, patient, empathetic listening, and generous, tangible support. Lay-down-your life for another love moves us from a posture of guarding self-interest to seeking the good of the many—especially those with less power and fewer resources. On the eve of Juneteenth, as we celebrate the emancipation of enslaved divine image bearers, I am mindful that lay-down-your-life-for-another-love won that day. Even though we have a long way to go, the faith of our ancestors claims love will win in the end. Our hope lies in the manifestation of the new heaven and the new earth of John's Revelation, that time and place where mourning and crying and pain will be no more, because God's home is fully established on earth as in heaven.

Until that day, with the Holy Three-in-One at work in and through us, we seek to love what God loves, and do what God does. Remember this:

God is love. Love that orders the cosmos and the chaos—out there, and in here. Love that creates out of nothing. Love that breathes life into all of creation.

Jesus is love. Love with dusty feet and legs that keep moving.  
Love with a gut that feels deep pain, and a belly that laughs with joy. Love  
with arms that reach and fingers that touch. Love with eyes that shine bright with the  
light of hope, the spark of justice, and the sting of tears.

The Holy Spirit is love. Love that abides. Love that remains.  
Love that crosses boundaries and takes risks to grow a world  
where everyone thrives abundantly, just like the holy Three-in-  
One-God—that beloved co-equal, co-flourishing community.

I want more Juneteenths. I want God's kingdom on earth as in heaven. I know you do,  
too. The Trinity will carry us toward the new heaven and new earth when we learn to welcome  
this trinity of love as we welcome our next breath. And when we learn to breathe this  
unending, earth bending love back into the world the boundaries of God's realm on earth will  
grow wider. Come Holy Trinity, find your dwelling place within us. Amen.

~ Jen Brothers, 2023