

Minding Your Place in the Trinity

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Trinity Sunday

Psalm 8

“O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!”

There is a prevailing myth of individualism in our American culture. One of my more favorite movies is the classic western *High Noon*. In this movie, the town sheriff, played by Gary Cooper, finds himself on his wedding day facing an impending danger of four criminals, who have pledged to and could most likely take his life, returning to the town he once saved. Cooper could stay and face his adversaries, or run, leave town, and live. The choice facing Cooper's character is compounded when his friends, his new wife, and all of the townspeople turn their back on him, leaving him on his own to face the danger of four fugitives. It is a story of one man who is given a choice to stand up on his own and be a brave hero despite the pressures around him, or be sensible and leave town. Cooper is portrayed as a strong individual who stands up for what he believes in (and considering this movie was made during the McCarthy era, another commentary about individualism may be suggested), and we can relate to this idea of the solitary hero. The individual, the lone hero, is pervasive in many of our movie plots. From Mel Gibson's character in *Lethal Weapon* to Bruce Lee in *Enter the Dragon* and Clint Eastwood in just about every movie he plays we see these strong individuals who do their own thing, do the right thing, and stand against the flow of common wisdom.

We can relate to the strong, individual hero, because our culture advocates strong sense of individualism. We look for that one, brave person standing on the pedestal, on the hilltop, on the mountaintop with the wind at his face, ready to take on the world. This is a value of our society - to go off on your own, to move to your own place, start your own family, be your own person without anyone else's help. Herbert Hoover described this value as “the American system of rugged individualism,” as “God-fearing men and women of honesty whose stamina and character and fearless assertion of rights led them to make their own way in life.” We can make it on our own, we can do it by ourselves, and we can all be individuals standing on our own mountaintop with our coffee in our hand, looking over the horizon, and taking note of all we have conquered without the help of anyone else. To ask for help is a sign of weakness. To show that you have to rely on others is a sign of imperfection. To make it on your own, to achieve success without any help is something to praise and celebrate. This is the prevailing myth of individualism in our American culture.

Yet, I believe that this ideal ultimately leads to sadness and isolation. The individual ends up alone, unwilling to be in a relationship where help is given and received. The individual is alone, and that is where many of us may be heading as we cut ourselves from any form of assistance and dependence. The more we try to break away, the more we try to be on our own, and be independent, the greater our sorrow, our sadness, our feelings of being overwhelmed, and our isolation increase. Maybe you can make it for a while, maybe you can be on your own, without the help and connection of anyone else, maybe you can be a part of that great Westward

expansion and hold up the ideals of rugged individualism, but eventually, the demands of life will become more than you can take. Eventually, the demands of life will overwhelm you in one way or another. Young parents with their first child look for help and advice. A single mother with four children faces the overwhelming anxiety and hopelessness as she tries to make it on her own. A young man, from a different country, here to try to make and find a better life will face insurmountable difficulties and the isolation is despairing. The first time you are faced with the overwhelming task of filling out your taxes, the new needs of an aging parent, of the scary and exciting new life of retirement. In each stage of life, pressures and demands are real. If you are alone, if you have no support, then eventually the demands will grow beyond anything you can handle on your own.

Consider the main character in the movie *Citizen Kane*. He was the model American who from nothing became something big and great, and doing it on his own (with the help of some money given to him). Yet the higher he went, the greater his individual convictions, and the more isolated he became until he died alone. This is the danger of individualism; isolation. In a society of individuals everyone's experience is most important to each person, and relationships are devalued. This is the danger of individualism; we get to our mountaintop, we aspire, we are strong and successful, but as soon as we finish our cup of coffee, we realize that there is no one around to help us get down from the mountain to replenish our supplies. Individualism leads to sadness, isolation and despair.

But we have the church; a community founded by Christ that offers hope in the face of individualism. We have a community that promises to accept you as you are, and promises to give you a place within that community and want to help you in your own life struggles. We have a community that encourages you to drop the bravado, the machismo of individualism and experience the loving, welcoming arms of this holy community. This is a community whose cornerstone is Christ, the one who offers forgiveness and grace to all of God's children. It is Christ who leads us as a people, and Christ who sets the precedent for our radical acceptance and inclusion. When reading Jack Kerouac's work *On the Road*, I found a great example of how this community of the church can be understood. Kerouac was trying to hitchhike to Denver from New York, and he writes about one of the rides he received on that particular journey: "The greatest ride of my life was about to come up, a truck, with a flatboard at the back, with about six or seven boys sprawled out on it, and the drivers, two young blond farmers from Minnesota, were picking up every single soul they found on that road - the most smiling, cheerful couple of handsome bumpkins you could ever wish to see, both wearing cotton shirts and overalls, nothing else; both thick wreted and earnest, with broad howareyou smiles for anybody and anything that came across their path. I ran up, said, "Is there room?" They said "Sure, hop on, s'room for everybody."

That is the community, which we call the church. Everybody is trying to get somewhere, and the church is that truck, offering to help out the individuals, offering to carry them, and promising that there is room for everybody. It is a community that helps each other out, and loves each other. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:26-27, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it." In a world where individualism is pushed and encouraged, the church is a community that offers a different way to live in the world. It is a way of helping and being helped, of caring and being cared for, of loving

and being loved, and all based upon the forgiveness and acceptance of Jesus Christ. Isn't it nice to know that there is a place you can go where you don't have to make it on your own? Isn't it nice to know that there is a community that celebrates relationships? The church is a community in the world that offers an alternative to the pursuit of the individual.

But individualism persists in the church just as it does in the world. Our churches are besieged with the emphasis for individual success by the world, and we have bought into that emphasis, hook, line, and sinker. Churches have bought into the individual myth, and they compare themselves to other churches with a measuring stick. Often when clergy congregate it is not to see how churches can help each other out, but to see if one church is doing better than another - it is a competition. When the ministry, which the church is advocating, is about the church itself - than that community, that group of people has become an individual church, breaking away from the greater body of Christ. When people in a church become more concerned about their own programs rather than the body of Christ, individualism drives the church. When the cult of the pastor takes precedence over the concern of Christ - individualism reigns. When egos take the place of charity in furthering the cause of Christ, individualism reigns. When the individual's experience becomes the authority for that individual, and there is no centering faith for all the members, than that community is lost.

It is a sad reality that churches, like the world, are places as well where the individual is held high: the pastor, the deacon, the trustee, the choir, it is so easy to fall into the myth of individualism even in the church. We face it in this church, with other churches, all around.

But pastor, you may say, we want to celebrate our diversity. We want to make a space for everyone; we aren't looking for a strict uniformity, a strict conformity and a place where the individual is forced into a cookie-cutter mold. I agree. We are looking for diversity, yet we must be careful.

Like a kitchen full of cooks who are all making their own dish, the church can become a kitchen of individuals who are blind to each other, who are focused on their own relationship with Christ, and their own role in the church. The community is precarious at best, and the body of Christ is broken. Individualism can persist in the church if we aren't careful.

How can we understand ourselves as a community that holds the individual and the community in tension in a healthy and positive way?

The Trinity gives us a model to follow as a community. Remember that in the church calendar, today is Trinity Sunday. It is the day we at least think about this profound and prevailing model of God. We have journeyed through and remembered God's creating presence, we have journeyed through and experienced Christ's life, we have journeyed through and experienced the movement of the Holy Spirit, and it is only right that we next move to the idea of the Trinity in our church's life. Remember that the Trinity is a model by which we try to understand the nature of God. Scripture offers us clues to the different aspects of the Trinity - three parts of God yet all God. We read in Genesis 1 and 2 God creating the world. We read of this creator God in Psalm 8 - of all which God made, of God's sovereign name, and of the place of humanity within creation. We hear the story of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 - the rushing violent wind surrounding and changing, and guiding the disciples, giving them the gift of tongues, and guiding them in becoming the church. We read of Christ in the four Gospels, his ministry to the world and witness his attesting to the Trinity. In Matthew 28, Christ commissions us to baptize

believers in the name of the Father, the Son and of the Holy Spirit - all parts of God, all parts of the Trinity. When Jesus was himself baptized, we heard a voice from God saying “This is my Son,” and we saw the Holy Spirit, maybe like a dove, falling upon Jesus. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit all were present at that profound moment. This is the Trinity as we have tried to understand it. Three parts of God, yet all the same God, and not one part is above another, instead, the Trinity is relational!

Some early theologians from the 4th century called the Cappadocians, described the Trinity as the Persons grounded in their own origin and mutual relation. They spoke of the different aspects of the Trinity, the creator, the redeemer and the sustainer, and how each was in perfect relationship with each other. None is higher, or more important than the other, and yet each has their own identity. The Trinity is relational!

I tried to find a picture that would demonstrate this understanding of God, for the sake of a visual aid. As I looked, I began to see a theme. The majority of the artists, in the Western tradition, painted the Trinity as three separate figures, God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit interacting with each other, and effected by each other. For example, Greco, the Spanish painter, has made a picture of God holding Christ crucified. You can see the sorrow on God’s face, the tender anguish as he is holding Christ. The Holy Spirit is above as a dove, shedding light and hope onto the tender scene. Greco is giving us an image of three individuals in perfect relationship with each other. The Trinity is relational!

Like a tripod, three legs, each holding the other two up - the Trinity is three aspects of God holding each other up. This is the power of the revelation of the Trinity, and it offers us some hope and guidance as we strive to be the community we are called to be.

You see, as a church, as a community of Christians, we can choose to follow the example of the Trinity. We can strive to be the community, which the Trinity is as a church. Think about this. As we gather in our community, following Christ we are faced with a tension - uniformity verses individuality. Do we call all people to ascribe to a uniform creed, a uniform interpretation of scripture, a uniform approach to worship, and a uniform way to serve the church? Or do we call the individuals to run from place to place never heeding the needs and concerns of others in the church? Neither! We are made in the image of God, we strive to be the person we were created to be by God, and the image of God is relational. I’ll say it again; the image of God is relational. The Trinity is about a perfect relationship between all three parts of God, and that is the image we are called to live.

This means we are to be true to whom we are and the gifts we have been given by God. Some of you may be gifted in music - so follow that gift. Some of you may be gifted in teaching, so follow that gift. Some may be gifted in building, some in listening, some in serving, and some in praying. We are all individuals with our own gifts, our own experiences, and our own struggles. We are all in a different place in our walk with God; we all experience God in different ways. Yet we are also drawn into a community that calls us to be aware and in relationship with each other. The teacher is to ask the musician for help leading a song. The builder is to ask the prayer warrior for that spiritual foundation which is so important. We work with each other and we realize that we need each other. This means we need to be as diverse as possible. We need to be a church that has many different walks of life: young and old, men and women, republicans and democrats, liberals and conservatives, dreamers and doers - we need all

in the church to fully be the church. We look to each other, take a risk, and ask for help, we look to each other and offer help, and we continue to strive to be the community Christ calls us to be as the Trinity is that perfect community. We mind our place in the Trinity, and stay in the relationships of the Trinity. There may be some of us in tune with the Holy Spirit, some may be meditating on the Cross, and some may be looking for that foundation of God's creation but we are all of the one and same community founded by Christ. We are all living in the image of God. This isn't a community of cookie cutter uniformity. It isn't a church that demands conformity, but is a community that takes risks in diversity, calling all to stay connected with each other while staying true to themselves.

What happens is that we begin to become the people God created us to be, we begin to live into the image of God. We begin to give others the space to live their own faith, but at the same time ask them to be a part of your faith. We will be reflecting the Trinity, and the Trinity is relational!

We will begin to do this with other churches, celebrating their own paths, and asking them to be a part of ours. We will begin to do this with the world as we evangelize. We will share our story, ask them to be a part of our story, and allow the world to come in its way, with each person as they are called and led by God. We will no longer be individual Christians gathering in a thing called the church, but we will be people of God, trying to be the church living in the image of God. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians, 13:13, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you," and they all will.

Mind your place in the Trinity. Mind your place in the church as the Trinity guides us, mind your relationships, and we will be the church.

AMEN