

"Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness . . . . So God created humankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them."

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you."

"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

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It is Trinity Sunday. This special day follows Easter, the season of our focus on the risen Christ, and Pentecost Sunday, which we celebrated last week, and which highlights the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Today, we will see if we can understand them together with God as a Trinity. And if we do, we will have succeeded where no one else in the history of Christianity has ever done so. We will have understood the nature and being of God! Let's see, how long do we have? (Looks at watch.) Oh, not enough. Well then, let's defer that lofty goal, and see if we can at least gain insight into our subject from today's three Scripture lessons.

In Genesis, during the first five days of creation, God creates simply by **speaking** things into being: "Let there be . . . ." and it comes to pass. As the Gospel of John and Paul understand this, God created the world by his **Word**, and that Word of God is his Son, Jesus. Jesus is the Word of God and the Wisdom of God, through which God brought all things into being.

But on the sixth day of creation in Genesis, something different happens. God, for the first time, speaks in the plural of Divine Majesty, "Let us," as in, "Let us make human beings in our image, according to our likeness." For centuries, many Christians have seen in that "us" something that was hidden from the original writer, a reflection of plurality within the essential unity or oneness of God, a foreshadowing of the later doctrine of the Trinity. "Let us" then might mean: the Triune God creating humans in the Triune God's own image.

Much ink has been spilled over what the **image of God**, or *imago dei*, as the theologians like to call it, really is. For a long time, the emphasis was on human **reason**, or rationality, as an aspect of humanity that might be special or unique, and therefore the essence of the image of God in us. But these texts nowhere talk about reason.

Karl Barth, a famous 20th century Swiss theologian, proposed a new or fresh way of looking at the image of God in us. He said that God is **relational** within the being of God, that is, within God's being there is an on-going conversation or a divine movement among the three persons. And therefore perhaps the image of God in us is this very **capacity for relationship**, a God-given capacity for relationship with God and with one another.

To support that view he pointed to our text from Genesis. Right after it says, "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them," it goes on to explain or clarify, "male and female he created them." The verse points to relationality among persons as definitive of the image of God in us. The point is not the genders but the inter-relationship, the mutuality of conversation, exchange, and love. The *imago dei* is our capacity for relationship, with God and one another, just as God, within God's own unitary being, is always in eternal triologue, conversation, love, and dance (the Greek theologians had a special word for this divine dance; they called it *perichoresis*, meaning "moving around," as in choreography).

Well, we'd better move on before the water gets any deeper and muddier.

In the lesson from Second Corinthians, the very last verse of that letter of Paul concludes with this blessing or benediction: "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all." Now, Corinth was in the **southern** part of Greece, which may account for the "you all." Right . . . .

There are not very many passages in the New Testament in which all the persons of what later came to be called the Trinity appear in one verse. That's the lectionary makers chose this particular text for this Sunday. But it is important for **another** reason: it tells us about the Triune God's essential **disposition** toward us.

"The **grace** of our Lord Jesus Christ" says **unequivocally** that God is **for** us. Jesus extends to us God's grace and mercy. We are completely forgiven and fully accepted. The American theologian Paul Tillich once wrote that faith is accepting that you are accepted. I hope you believe that.

"The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ," yes, and then "the love of God." The Father's total disposition toward us is **love**. I was not taught this as a young person. Well meaning people tried to get us to believe in God by threatening us with hell and wrath. But then they also quoted John 3:16, "For God so loved the world." I could never put the two together. Therefore, God's love always seemed **conditional**: "I will love you if . . . if you shape up . . . if you are a good person . . . if you obey my laws . . . and if you don't there'll be hell to pay, literally.

Then someone loved me unconditionally, major screw-ups, personality flaws, and all. And that opened the window of possibility that, if a human being could love another human being **unconditionally**, no matter what, then maybe that was how God loves us too. And I began to grow into the unconditional love of God. Love is God's essential nature. "God **is** love," not just **has** love, but **is** love. I hope you will join me in believing, as the Old Testament says so often, that "God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love."

**Finally** in 2nd Corinthians Paul writes, "May the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all." As Pastor Nigel said last week, it is the message of Pentecost that God gives his people the Holy Spirit, to bind us together, with a beautiful diversity of gifts, into one, holy, and inclusive fellowship. The word

"communion" or "fellowship" is *koinonia*, and it comes from the Greek word for "common," from which we also derive "community" and "communion." Jesus Christ is the one who, by the presence of the Holy Spirit, dwells among us, and is in us, and is **common** to all. By the Spirit we enjoy the blessing of this community, and so the healing and saving fellowship of the Holy Spirit is with us all.

The **Gospel** lesson is our final teaching today about the Trinity. Here we see our **mission** as Christians in relation to the Trinity. Under the universal authority of Jesus, we get to make disciples wherever we go. We might literally translate Matthew 28:19-20 this way: "As you go about your daily life, make followers of Jesus by bringing people into his community and helping them to learn and follow his way of life." As we **do** this, he promises to be with us always, every day, guiding and strengthening us.

This mission is not just for a special few, but is for all disciples. We **all** get to bring people to Jesus, by the example of our lives, where actions speak louder than words, but also by our **words**, when we can say what God's love means to us, why we attend worship, or why we seek to follow Christ. When people catch our enthusiasm and our joy, when they see our love, they may want to join us on our journey together here at St. Augustine's, if it is the right place for them. And if so, then they will be baptized in the name of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Matthew saw his community as a School of Disciples, always teaching one another and learning from one another "all that Jesus had commanded them." He saw that being a Christian was a **journey**, not a destination. We are all on the road **together**, helping one another go the distance, **encouraging** each other along the way.

For this Trinitarian mission, blessed by God, lifting up the Son, and empowered by the Spirit, we have the promise of Christ's presence, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age," his presence not only in the Eucharist, but

**personally** present, residing **in** us and **among** us every day, until our journey ends and is taken up by those who come after us.

And as one contemporary songwriter\* put it:

So, "may all who come behind us find us faithful

May the fire of our devotion light their way

May the footprints that we leave

Lead them to believe

And the lives we live inspire them to obey

Oh may all who come behind us find us faithful

After all our hopes and dreams have come and gone

And our children sift through all we've left behind

May the clues that they discover

and the memories they uncover

Become the light that leads them to the road we **each** must find

Oh may all who come behind us find us faithful."

Thanks be to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

\*Steve Green