



The Episcopal Church of
St. John the Baptist

Trinity Sunday: Acknowledging what we don't understand and keeping silence long enough to listen

Sermon for Sunday, June 7, 2020 (Trinity Sunday, Year A)

Mtr. Tracy J. Wells Miller, Rector

Today is Trinity Sunday. In previous years, you've heard my spiel on how there are no adequate analogies to describe the Trinity, and how perhaps, instead of trying to explain or make sense of this sacred mystery, we should instead be silent in acknowledgement of all we don't know or understand about God.

The readings the lectionary gives us for Trinity Sunday this year are rather interesting. We have the first creation story from Genesis, a tiny excerpt from the end of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians that doesn't seem related to the Trinity except that it ends with a benediction in Trinitarian form, and a tiny excerpt from the Gospel of Matthew that also doesn't seem very related to the Trinity except that Jesus sends the disciples out to baptize people in the name of the Trinity.

The dominant message in the scriptures for today for me is the creation story. Perhaps the framers of the lectionary included it on Trinity Sunday to emphasize that Jesus and the Holy Spirit were with God the Father from the very beginning of creation (even though they're not referred to in this passage from Genesis), but the message that pops out for me today is that God created the world and everything in it and called it good.

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I don't know about you, but I can't hear that message in our current context without thinking of the civic unrest boiling over in our country over the killing of George Floyd and so many others like him. The systemic racism that results in black people being disproportionately killed by police in this country stands as a stark contrast to the message of our scriptures, that God created everything there is and called it good.

Activists cry "Black lives matter" because the message black men, women, and children receive every day in this country, despite the advances of civil rights and supposed equal protection under the law, is that black lives *don't* matter. Their deaths aren't worth investigating, their communities aren't worth protecting, their children aren't worth educating or investing social resources in. God created everything and



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everyone in the world and called them good. Humankind created societies that call only some people good.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in reflecting on his work with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa, says that racism is not only a sin, it is blasphemy. It is, indeed, the **ultimate** blasphemy, he says, because “it can make a child of God doubt that he or she is a child of God.” Racism denies that all people are created in the image of God. It holds up some people as worth more than others, based on nothing except the color of their skin.

In giving the Absalom Jones lecture at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, MA in 2002, Archbishop Tutu said, **“People of faith cannot be neutral on this issue. To stand on the sidelines is to be disobedient to the God who said we are created, all of us, in this God’s image.”**

Yesterday, I made my way to Watsonville City Plaza for a peaceful public demonstration in remembrance of George Floyd, to say that Black Lives Matter. Thinking about our reading from Genesis for this Sunday, I held a sign that said, **“Black lives are holy, sacred, and created in God’s image.”**

Several years ago, when I was serving at St. Cuthbert’s in Oakland, I got connected with a local neighborhood group who was standing on the 580 overpass at Keller Ave every Friday morning holding “Black Lives Matter” signs. The first time I showed up, there were about 4 people there, all women, several of them white and one Asian. I wondered why there were no black people there as part of the demonstration. Somehow it didn’t seem “authentic” if there weren’t black people at a Black Lives Matter demonstration. But as we stood there, I realized how much it meant to the black people who drove by that people who weren’t black were standing there holding up those signs, and that we were standing there on a “regular” day

Many honked their horns, waved, and gave us a thumbs up. One woman pulled over, got out of her car, and came up and hugged us and thanked us for being there.

One of the buttons that group had made that they wore and handed out to others said, **“End White Silence: Black Lives Matter.”**

One of the people at the protest in Watsonville yesterday held a sign that said, **“White silence = black death.”**



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That's why I was there yesterday. Because it's important for white people to be loud and vocal in saying that black lives matter. Silence can indicate consent or complicity with an unjust and oppressive system, especially when you look like the people doing the oppressing.

At the same time, though, there are times and places in which silence is the most appropriate response in discussions about race. Too often well-meaning white people take leadership in ways that silence the voices of people of color. One of the messages I've gotten loud and clear in my training in antiracism work is that sometimes, white people need to stop talking and start listening.

The confession of sin we'll be using for the next several weeks was sent to me by a friend who is an Indian-American Roman Catholic. It was written by an organization called Be the Bridge, a specifically Christian racial reconciliation organization. After learning more about them on their website, bethebridge.com, I discovered that they have a Facebook group for discussion of how we in the church can "be the bridge to racial unity." I requested to join the group, and was asked to fill out a short questionnaire. The first two questions were expected:

How did you learn about Be the Bridge and what makes you want to join this group?

Do you have experience with racial reconciliation and what do you expect to gain from this group?

The third question was the kicker:

All members must complete a series of educational units while observing 3 months of silence in the group (no posting or commenting).

I wasn't expecting that one! It really stopped me in my tracks while I thought about what it would feel like to impose that restriction on myself. Once approved to join the group, the group's guidelines elaborate on this requirement:

"All new members are required to spend at least three months in a discipline of active listening—no posting or commenting ("liking" posts is allowed). This does not mean you join the group, check out for three



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months, then come back and start posting and commenting. During your initial three months, we expect you to spend time in the group. First, complete all the units in the Unit section. Read. Watch. Learn. Feel. Examine yourself. Wrestle with God. Become familiar with our terminology and protocols. Active listening is a foundational bridge-building skill. We realize that some of you join our group with years or even decades of racial reconciliation experience. We have much we can learn from you, but we still require you to enter into this discipline.”

“Wow,” I thought, “these people are serious.” I respected the fact that they require all new members to go through the same period of waiting, even if they have lots of experience with antiracism work, and no matter what their racial background is. There was something about the way they called for “observing three months of silence” in a “discipline of active listening” that really struck me. It was a powerful spiritual approach that I hadn’t seen in any of my other antiracism work. I wondered about the effect it would have if we all observed a period of intentional silence before speaking on any important matter or topic.

In our diocesan clergy meeting this week, Bishop Lucinda encouraged us, when preaching on this topic, to “help people to move beyond the place of position and judgment to a place of inquiry and learning.”

That stuck with me, because I know how easy it is for me to go to the place of position and judgment. Standing up and holding a sign in a protest is very clearly taking a position, and to some degree making a judgment. While I do believe it is important to state clearly that black lives matter, that black lives are created in the image of God and are holy and precious in God’s eyes, Bishop Lucinda and the organization “Be the Bridge” have challenged me to move beyond stating positions and taking stances to asking questions and listening more deeply.

In his speech to Episcopal Divinity School in 2002, Archbishop Tutu wondered if some of America’s racial wounds might be healed through a process similar to South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and I’ve often wondered the same thing myself since learning about that process.

“If it could happen that enemies became allies, friends, partners in South Africa, then it could happen in other conflict-ridden places,” Tutu said. “You are going to become



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a very strong and wonderful country the day you have the courage to listen to each other.”

Once again, I find myself calling for silence on Trinity Sunday — not just out of acknowledgement of what we don’t know and fully understand about God, but also out of acknowledgement of what we don’t know and fully understand about our fellow human beings who are created in the image of God and called good by him. Let us stop trying to talk about or explain things we don’t understand. Instead, let us be humble enough to acknowledge when we don’t know about something and open ourselves to learning from others. In a world full of words, let us keep silence long enough to listen.