

Kirby Lawrence Hill

Abington Presbyterian Church

June 16, 2019

Psalm 8

Romans 5:1-5

FAITH, HOPE AND LOVE

Today is Father's Day. I am grateful that I can be grateful for my father. If it was not for him, I would not exist. That is sort of obvious. But far beyond that, my dad loved me and provided for me before I could even begin to understand what it meant to have an empty heart or an empty stomach. He gave me guidance when I needed it. He has relished me as a treasured part of the family. His high hopes combined with his consistent encouragement helped me to grow into the person I am today. When as a child, I had two strikes on me as I nervously stood in the batter's box, I could hear his voice calling out, "It only takes one, Kirb." And when I struck out multiple times in a game or elsewhere, he was a caring presence for me. I have known my father as someone who is utterly reliable and dependable. He has lived out a faithfulness that has been an example to many. He has shown me what it is to live sacrificially, so the needs of others can be met. He has longed for me to live a life of meaning and fulfillment and he has shown me how that could happen. I am deeply grateful for my father.

With that kind of life experience, I am enriched by the father imagery and language that is sometimes used for the first person of the Trinity. I have no trouble praying along with Jesus to our Father in heaven. But I realize that the word 'father' means something very different to me than it does to others who have a different experience with a paternal figure in their lives. Sadly, there are fathers who have abandoned or abused their children. There are fathers who have shamed or denigrated their children. There are fathers whose needs were so unmet for themselves that they had no capacity to lovingly care for others. Those who have had a father something like that may well find the use of the term 'father' not to help in their understanding of who God is.

Our society calls today Father's Day. On this Sunday after Pentecost, the calendar that guides many Christians in our worship calls today Trinity Sunday. It is the only Sunday named after a particular Christian doctrine, when we focus on the

affirmation that God is one God, but also that God is revealed through three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I have no desire to present a lecture on the nature of the Trinity and the long history of named heresies that arose over Trinitarian controversies. I do think, however, an affirmation of the Trinity calls us to think about and to be open to experience God in a way that goes beyond just our limited human experience. So even though the traditional Trinitarian language for God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the nature of the Trinity calls us to go beyond limiting our understanding of God to just one kind of imagery. There is both male and female imagery used to describe God in scripture. To affirm the Trinity is, in part, to embrace the expansiveness of a God who doesn't fit into the little boxes we devise.

Augustine was an early church bishop and theologian from what today is called Algeria in northern Africa. One day, he was walking along the beach, when he came across a little child who was running back and forth with a shell, pouring water from the sea into a hole he had dug in the sand. When Augustine asked the boy what he was doing, he replied, "I'm trying to put the whole sea into this hole." That experience informed the theologian about the extreme limitedness of a human exercise of putting an infinite God into a finite mind and finite concepts.¹ The Trinity helps us to recognize that God is beyond our full understanding. What God is up to in this world exceeds our ability to see or understand it all. But among the better ways to better understand the Trinity is to recount the story of how God gives us faith, hope, and love.

Our reading from Romans 5 is one of the few places where scripture mentions together all three members of the Trinity. It is one of Paul's passages where he also weaves in the three great gifts of faith, hope, and love. About 15 years ago, our denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) put out a paper called "The Trinity: God's Love Overflowing." It's a great title. Out of God's overflowing love, Jesus came as the clearest revelation of who God is, and the Holy Spirit enables you and me to receive that love through the other gifts of faith and hope. Our encounters are with a loving God over and above us, a God for and with us, a God in and among us. That shapes our faith and gives us reason for hope. Paul indicates this is a God who doesn't protect us from all suffering. But when we do suffer, God can work to transform something that might even be dreadful and painful into an experience

through which we can grow and thrive, as God goes with us through the difficulties. We don't have to lose hope when we suffer, because of our faith that God's love, which was personified in Jesus Christ, has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us. In faith, in hope, in love, we get to encounter the life, the liveliness of our God, three in one.

Even in a world of pain and violence, every now and then, we catch a glimpse of what being wrapped up in this loving, self-giving, Trinitarian life of God is like. On a cold January night in 1941, in unheated barracks at Stalag 8A, a German prisoner of war camp in Görlitz, Germany, some of the most beautiful music ever composed was played for the first time. It had been composed by a prisoner, a Frenchman and devout Christian by the name of Olivier Messiaen. The work's instrumentation was determined by the instruments and performers at hand. He said he wanted to compose some music that would proclaim, even in the terrors of the POW camp, that the love and hope of God were still alive. He was tired of the beat of the Nazi jack boot: hup-two-three-four. And so he composed his music according to a beautiful verse in the French translation of the Book of Revelation, where an angel announces, "There is no more time," that is to say, at the end of time, all broken, jagged, and seemingly hopeless human history will be gathered into the eternal and loving life of God.

He named the piece, "The Quartet for the End of Time." How do you compose music like that, music without time? The meters, the rhythms are irregular, constantly changing, which means that the musicians cannot play in splendid isolation, simply counting out their parts in time. Instead, they have to pay attention to each other, to attend to each other. They have to play as an ensemble. More than that, they have to play in communion with each other. In fact, right on the score where most composers would have written, "Play slowly, play moderately, play rapidly," Messiaen wrote, "Play tenderly, play with ecstasy, play with love." ²

Whether we refer to God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or as Mother, Child, and Spirit of Life, we celebrate this day that we belong to a God who relates to God's self and to us tenderly, with ecstasy, with love. Imagine those qualities put to music, and that can inspire us, wherever we are, to live out lives that reflect a similar heavenly music. Faith, hope, and love are the notes on the music

manuscript before us. Let's follow the conductor the best we are able, and I dare say we will find ourselves grateful to be grateful to our God, Three in One, this day and forevermore.

¹<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/kathyschiffer/2012/08/the-seashell-and-the-three-in-one/>

²Based on a story from a sermon by Tom Long found at http://day1.org/3823-the_start_of_the_trail , June 3, 2012.