

22 May 2005
Feast of the Most Holy Trinity
Genesis, 1:1-2:3
2 Corinthians, 13:5-14
Matthew, 28:16-20

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We're about to reach the peak of tour-bus season. Over the next few months, thousands will pour into our city, bringing hundreds of thousands of people to explore our city.¹ Most tourists will tromp through the Smithsonian museums, and the Capitol, and the White House, and the monuments. They'll see the public facades of official Washington, but that's not the reality. Very few will get to Meridian Hill Park or the gardens at Dumbarton Oaks or the S. Elizabeth's campus. Very few will get to Brookland, the Gold Coast, or Glover Park. And even if they did, they still wouldn't know the city.

To know the city, they'd need to meet some Washingtonians. They'd have to sit down at a meal in someone's home. They'd have to develop some friendships with the people who live here. Then they'd begin to know, knowing from the inside, rather than just gazing from the outside. The same is true with every city, every place. To know its essence, you have to see it from the inside, you have to start to become part of it in some way.

We are mistaken to think of the Feast of the Holy Trinity as the celebration of a Christian doctrine. Today, we are celebrating God himself, what he's like in himself, his inner reality, his essence. The best way to know the what God is like in himself is through Jesus, through developing a relationship with Jesus. Then we enter more deeply the reality of God. If we pray, if we repent, if we follow our Lord's command to love one another the way he loves us, if we share the gospel, if we make mercy and humility and charity our chief qualities, if we seek justice and care for the vulnerable, if we recognize the dignity and grandeur of every person, even every creature, then we're developing a relationship with Jesus, and we begin to enter the inner life of God, the life of the Holy Trinity. Life comes from directing ourselves outside of ourselves. Life comes from focusing beyond ourselves. We see that in the persons of God.

The inner life of God, the very being of God, is a community. Three persons – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – commune, dwell together, and are one. It's a mystery, and until we die and fully enter God, we won't get it. It'll seem paradoxical and inconsistent. The good news, however, is that in this life we can know something of God's inner life, and be part of God's inner life, even though we don't understand. G.K. Chesterton says, "This thing that bewilders the intellect utterly quiets the heart."²

God is love. In his essential being, he is love, and love can't exist apart from community. Love can not love itself. Love needs an object, and even better, someone with whom to share love. Richard of S. Victor, a great medieval theologian, explained that the highest love is the love two persons share for a third. The love of a parent for a child is holy and excellent, but the love the two

¹ The idea of the city analogy comes from Edward Nason West, *Seasons of the Heart*, 'Trinity Sunday,' Forward Movement Publications (1994), pp. 120-121. Canon West, of course, referred to New York.

² G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, Harold Shaw Publishers (1994), p. 146.

parents share among themselves for the child is an even higher love. Love we share with someone for a third person is the highest love. So God, the highest love, must in himself be a community of three persons. Our purpose in life is to love, to love God and one another, to grow so that more and more we love the way God loves us. Our purpose in life is to enter into the inner life of God.

Last week, Thomas Friedman had an op-ed ruminating about suicide bombers.³ He pointed out that in the last month about 400 Iraqi Muslims have been killed by other Muslims, but that the Muslim world has expressed little outrage about this. Their silence has legitimized this ghastly tactic of suicide bombing and hardly honors the Koran's injunction to mercy and compassion.

Friedman writes, "If you want to stop a wave of suicide bombings, the likes of which we are seeing in Iraq, it takes a village. I am a big believer that the greatest restraint on human behavior is not laws and police, but culture and religious authority. It is what the community, what the village, deems shameful. That is what restrains people." He concludes that the problem is: "How do we get the Sunni Arab village [the Sunni Arab community] to de-legitimize suicide bombers?" Friedman understands that our community forms who we are.

Christianity, Islam, every serious religion holds life and creation sacred. Our culture, our community must hold us accountable to our professed beliefs. Muslims are hardly the only hypocrites. In our culture, greed corrupts us, dehumanizes us. The Church doesn't express enough outrage at our greed, consumerism, materialism, individualism; outrage at the way we ravage nature, God's creation; outrage at the way we use religious belief to justify treating other people badly. These spiritual weaknesses and failings of our culture infects each of us. None of us is autonomous. We are all part of the whole.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the former primate of the Church in South Africa and Nobel Peace Prize winner, developed *Ubuntu* theology. In some African languages, *ubuntu* is the word for human being, what it means to be a human being. In fighting Apartheid, Tutu argued that human beings are not defined by race, but by the fact of their creation in the image of God. As we heard from Genesis, "God created the human in his image, in the image of God He created him, male and female he created them."⁴ (Gen 1:27)

God himself is a community of persons, and we too can only be human in community with other persons. A solitary human being is an oxymoron. We become persons, we grow in the image of God, not through self-determination, not through self-assertion, but through community, through relationships with other people. *Ubuntu* theology begins with the fact that I am what I am not because of what I want to be, but because of my relationships with other people. Our relationships with other people define us. Tutu explains, "To praise a person for displaying *ubuntu* [is to say,] 'You share what you have.' It is to say, 'My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound with yours.' We belong in a bundle of life."⁵

In recent centuries in the West, our sense of what a human being is has developed more along the lines, "I think, therefore I am." *Ubuntu* theology says, "I am because we are. I am a human being

³ Thomas Friedman, 'Outrage and Silence,' *The New York Times*, 18 May 2005.

⁴ Translation: Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, W.W. Norton (2004).

⁵ Drew Christiansen, S. J., 'Putting it Together,' *America*, Vol. 182, No. 9, 18 March 2000.

because I exist with other people; the community forms who I am.”⁶ *Ubuntu* theology is a new way of saying an idea as old as humanity. “The Lord God said, “It is not good for the human to be alone.”⁷ (Gen 2:18) We can’t know God on our own. We can’t even be human. We need other people.

It seems, therefore, that a city, a place with lots of people, and lots of different types of people, would be the perfect place to know God. But it’s not just being around people. It’s knowing people, having a relationship with them, having a meal with them, becoming friends. Cities allow for more anonymity and loneliness than anywhere else. If you want to get lost and be isolated, live in a city.

One of the essential purposes of the Church is to provide a place for people to know one another, to have a meal together at the altar, to commune with one another. The Church is a place to belong, to build community, because one of the primary ways we experience God is through other persons. Relationships are more important than theology in creating a whole, healthy, godly person.

Relationships with a wide variety of people make us grow and blossom into what God intends us to be. One of this parish’s great strengths, for which I thank God, is our diversity, but we shouldn’t be complacent. We need to build on this by reaching out to people who challenge us, people with whom we disagree, people not like me.

In the gospel today, Jesus commanded us to make disciples of all nations. The Kingdom of God is made up of every kind of people, not people just like me, not a homogenous group of like-minded people, not people of the same race, education, economic means, political views, but an enormous diversity. Heaven is not a club. Revelation describes heaven, the Kingdom of God, as composed of every tribe and language and people and nation. (Rev 5:9b) The Kingdom of God, perfected humanity, reflects the reality of God – unity in diversity, and diversity in unity.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁶ John Allen, ‘Ubuntu: An African Challenge to Individuality and Consumerism,’ *Trinity News*, 24 April 2002.

⁷ Translation: Robert Alter.