

*Life in Community*

Trinity Sunday

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Texts: Romans 8

Did God need to create the universe? Have you ever thought about that? If so – what do you think? If you haven't thought about it, does it seem interesting to you at all to ponder that question...or not so much? 'Did God need to create the universe?' – that is something of a standard theological question that theologians consider as they are pondering the nature of God; some theologians want to emphasize that God does not have any need or necessity to create; so God graciously CHOOSES to create, but didn't HAVE to, some theologians would say.

Well, let's engage in a bit of such theological pondering. And let's try to imagine God, just God, before creation, before time and space - only God. This may sound like pretty theoretical stuff – or just odd or impossible –but what I am more going for is mystical, wondering...so think of just God...and imagine the presence of perfect community in God: the community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is the nature of the One God to be eternally expressed in 3 persons (more mystery for us)– and this community within God is complete; there is nothing God needs – to be God is good. But here's what I think – it seems to me that part of the very nature of the perfect community of God is to create further community. So perhaps it was not necessary for God to create, but instead I would say it was inevitable - because perfect community has in its nature to expand it, to include more in it. Creation is the inevitable expression of the fullness of community of the One God. And it's quite an expression! – the universe is a big place – remarkable; and the earth just one infinitesimal incredible part of it – remarkable; and human beings just one small sliver of the life of earth, BUT...human beings created with the unique ability to create community like God does – the ability to expand community as an expression of goodness and fullness – remarkable. When Scripture says human beings are made 'in the image of God' it tells us that we have the ability, like God, to include others in community; to do so is to express the very nature of the God who made us.

That's what we CAN do as human beings...turns out though, in human history, there is nothing inevitable about human beings following this path. The reality of community among us

human-folk is that the whole community thing is a big challenge for us: our God-given unique human capacity is true, expansive community, but our human TENDENCY is instead to create exclusive community – the kind of community that divides and distinguishes one from others. The human tendency is a warped version of God's act of creation, as we create separations among us.

It is all too easy to see this human tendency and the havoc it wreaks – through history or in our world today: the divisions of peoples and nations, of classes and races, of religions and ideologies – continually played out in discord, in violence. Most any kind of community you can think of has as part of its identity that it is exclusive from or divided from or against something else. This anti-creation kind of community goes on and on and on...the broad scale of human community is a pretty fraught situation, and that is no surprise for us to hear and too easy for us to see.

But what I think IS more surprising, and befuddling, is how difficult it is to have community work well on even a smaller basis, on a much less ambitious scale than a nation or a race or culture –on the scale of say, a church? of a congregation?...let's say for instance, Hope Church. This is a community of some 500 or so souls who know where they do or do not attend on a Sunday morning ☺ That's a manageable size group – community here should be doable in a rather idyllic way. But true community, EVEN in a church, even in HOPE CHURCH, turns out to be quite a challenge. Here we are and you would think we would, could, all think the same...but oddly enough, people have different ideas about things...different even than what the ministers think! (now THAT is shocking, and quite divisive I might add!) – different ideas about worship and theology and policy and programs; different ideas about facilities and budgets and outreach and education; and different ideas about music and hymns...especially hymns – on any given Sunday, I can guarantee that there are people both uplifted and upset by the hymn selections...can't we all just get along? But to be a congregation like Hope Church really does reflect the struggle of community – some people feel welcomed here, others don't; some find connection, some feel on the fringes; some feel nurtured, others feel uninspired (and did I mention

about the hymns...? ☺). Turns out EVEN church is difficult for community – and sometimes divisions tear even churches apart.

Surprising how hard community can be, even on a small scale...and even on a smaller scale yet within the relationships, the community, of our families, right? You'd think with just a few folks - in a family – a couple in a marriage, a partnership - in friendships, even –THAT we could get right...should be easy...but it's not! Even in those smallest circles of community, it's a challenge– there is love and pain, there is nurture and conflict, there is difference and challenge – making of those relationships a place of fullness and creativity is not easy.

So, let's review the picture I've painted here – I have gone from the mystical beauty of creation springing forth from the perfect community of God, to a description of every aspect of human community as broken – in the world, in the church, in our relationships – riddled with division and violence at worst; and at best a challenge to maintain any sort of community at all.

Anyone want to purchase that painting? It's a mess! Shall I end the sermon right here? Or shall I bring into this sermon some scripture that has something to say about this picture – from Romans 8:

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh-- for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ

A passage like this could seem pretty ethereal, detached from reality in its own way – characterizing this fleshly world as bad and our spiritual nature as good...but I don't think that's what's happening here – Paul talks about 'flesh' as having to do with slavery and fear – about the things in life that trap, control, diminish - the kinds of things that divide and isolate us from one another. And so then 'spirit' is not something detached - it is about the Spirit of God, the creative presence of God that nurtures our capacity for true connection and community. It's interesting to realize here, that as Paul writes, he is always talking in a plural way - the 'you' here is always plural: 'you'all' - Paul always frames both the challenge and the creative possibilities of community as a group – and that's what leads Paul to the central affirmation here of being children of God

together. And what's so important to notice is that this community identity as children of God is not given as a distinction that then marks us apart again from others, but instead in Christ our creative capacity is freed - we are given a faith in God that expands community to others: to be 'heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ' is to be joined with God in creating the fullness of community in the world.

Which means, I think, that Romans with its talk of being children of God, points us this day right towards baptism and profession of faith. Because one way to look at what's happened here today would be simply to say: *'well good for us! We have these beautiful babies and we can make promises right here for our little Hope Church community.'* Or, we can see that this is not about something exclusive, but about our calling as children of God to extend such promises to all: that to baptize these children is to care about all God's children. As Sam and Sam profess their faith, it could be about *"we're all set with God – good luck to others"*, but instead we see them expressing their faith in connection and community with others...Sam Gruenler says *I believe that to be a Christian is to cherish people around us, to act as stewards of the earth, to live a positive life.* Sam Accardo says *as a Christian and child of God I will show justice in my life and love others and God's creation...* they see being a part of Hope Church as seeking to build community beyond Hope Church. Even church is a challenge, but it is also the community God gives to practice the hard, creative work of God calling us to expand community beyond these walls.

It's the kind of hard work, for instance, that might be involved in talking about Discerning Holy Relationships, as we have done here at Hope Church over the past several weeks. It's complicated stuff – civil and theological and legal and cultural issues to understand and unravel; people with different viewpoints – considering our connections with our Classis and denomination that we love. And as our Elders have sought wisdom in decisions about matters of marriage, they have had the wisdom to know that HOW we discern is as important as what we are discerning: that true community is best nurtured and expressed not simply in achieving a decision, but in truly listening, loving, learning – with one another and with God - as we discern together. This time has not been about simply seeking a stance to distinguish or divide, but about trying to live out the

creative capacity of community that God in Christ through the Spirit has given us: the capacity for this community to witness to the expansive grace of God for all God's children; the call as the body of Christ to witness to true community for us and our world. To do that is a challenge – it takes courage and conviction, it takes humility and wisdom – and with such, the Spirit of God creates...

So I think that for any such discerning, for any community like this place – a church – Hope Church – I think that for such things these babies and families and youth today are teachers that God gives to us: sisters and brothers who renew in us the truth that to be connected in faith to God – is at the same time God creating in us and calling us to extend such love and grace and community to others.

That calling is never simple or easy or perfect – but it is also never found in the ways of slavery and fear, never centered in the ways that diminish and divide; we are children of God – God in Christ has shared true community with us and freed us to receive and share such community with others – through the Spirit of the One God it is the very nature of our community to do so. It is our calling, as our liturgy of baptism and faith speaks for us today, to always seek the things that make for *unity, purity, and peace*. Thanks be to God. AMEN.