

May 31, 2015
Falcon Heights Church UCC
Falcon Heights, MN
The Rev. Anne Swallow Gillis

Trinity Sunday
John 16:12-15
Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

TRINITY OVERFLOW

I often wonder about what God is doing in the world. In the Christian tradition we talk about a God who is both all-powerful and all-loving, all-compassionate. I listen to the worldwide and national news, I listen to your accounts of struggle in your lives. Flooding and multiple deaths in rain-soaked Texas and Oklahoma; personal challenges, agonies faced by those closer to home. Where is God in all this loss? As I read the hair-raising reports yesterday of multiple deaths and more rain to come down south, I remembered another natural disaster a few years ago. It was 2013, and the Washington Post (May 25, 2013) picked up the story of an Oklahoma tornado survivor being interviewed by CNN anchor Wolf Blitzer about her family's narrow escape. "I guess you've got to thank the Lord, right?" the newsman inquired. Apparently the young woman stood there with a toddler in her arms and said nothing. Blitzer pressed on: "Do you thank the Lord? For that split-second decision that saved you?" The woman finally replied: "I'm actually an atheist."

Well. According to the Post story, only about 2% of Americans actually describe themselves as atheists. Encountering a self-described atheist in American's heartland is apparently so unusual that Glenn Beck claimed the CNN interview must have been some kind of fake. The author of the Post story, Alexandra Petri, noted that thanking the Lord for such events is a natural assumption for around 80% of Americans, and that we presume everyone thinks the same way. "Hold on a minute," I remember thinking to myself. I would not place myself among the 2% of atheists, but maybe we have something in common here! I don't believe that God saves certain people from tornadoes or floods and does not save others. For me, this is not God's job description: specifically guiding a split-second decision that allows for safety for some, and letting others be crushed by crumbling walls, killed by flying debris or drowning. Yet, I still would claim that God is in the middle of all of it.

I imagine we have a variety of perspectives in this congregation on just what God is up to in the course of natural disasters, and in this world of ours in general. Has God created our world but now left its workings to us? If God is, as I just suggested, in the middle of all these things.....what is God *doing*? As Anthony Robinson, UCC minister and author, asks in his book "What's Theology Got to Do with It: Convictions, Vitality and the Church" (p. 68-69): "Is God simply a concept to be discussed?...Is our life a seminar about God, rather than a relationship to be confessed or a community where God's transformative presence is changing lives?" Last week we heard again the wild story of Pentecost, where Jesus' disciples were suddenly filled with the power of the Holy

Spirit sent by God. After Pentecost, these men and women start to courageously speak out about being filled with the Holy Spirit and a profound sense of new life. Courageously they step forward, testifying about their personal, life-changing experiences of God, Jesus and the indwelling of God's renewing power. Did the God of the first century act differently than the God of the 21st? Are there only two options now: there is no God who interacts with us or God is in control of *everything*? From dramatic natural disaster rescues to helping us find parking places? Neither of these seem like good options to me.

Traditionally, the Sunday following Pentecost is designated as Trinity Sunday. It's a time when the worldwide church reflects on and celebrates the reality that God interacts with and is known to us in many ways. Anthony Robinson would say that the age-old doctrine of the Trinity is the place to wrestle with these questions about how God relates to us and the rest of the world. He claims that this "three persons of God in one" idea guards against our turning God into some kind of personalized comfort zone. The Trinity "holds different truths in tension" (p. 64) and keeps pushing us to consider how we might know and experience God in different ways and different forms.

It took the official Christian church about 300 years to formulate this symbolic language about both the Person and the actions of God, and it was stimulated by considerable controversy about Jesus himself. Who was he? Divine in some way, a divine creature in human disguise, or all human? Who is Jesus now as God's anointed one, the Risen Messiah, the Risen Christ, in our midst? This ancient Trinitarian wording, "Father, Son and Holy Ghost" became the shorthand metaphorical language used to talk about God-in-the-world. This wording is still used in Christian baptism, and also in the rite of confirmation when young people affirm the baptismal vows made on their behalf when they were infants. Through the centuries there have been numerous controversies, heresies have been declared and denounced, and blood has been spilled over the doctrine of the Trinity. In the early 17 and 18th centuries, debate over the Trinity, particularly the nature of Jesus, divided many of our United Church of Christ forbears in New England Congregational churches.

One of our United Church of Christ treasures is church historian and author Barbara Brown Zigmund. She explains that this metaphor of God as creator, redeemer and sustainer describes God as "one God existing in community." The Trinity speaks of how "God embodies the very nature of reality as relational and communal" (Barbara Brown Zigmund, *Christian Century*, 4/15/87). I hear that same relational and communal aspect of God in today's reading from Book of Proverbs: Wisdom, a feminine noun in the original Hebrew, was there with God at the beginning of time. Wisdom, as the divine feminine aspect of God? Partner with God? There may be more "we-ness" to God than we think. "Let us create humans in *our* image," God speaks in Genesis, "male and female let *us* create them." BBZ's point is that we can both understand God better, and who we are as human beings, when we recognize "the relational

nature of God.” Another way of saying this is “we are all connected...and God is a part of that precious connectedness.”

Things get even livelier in my mind when I think of both a masculine and feminine aspect within the Trinity itself. Might this Lady Wisdom be an inter-connecting, animating force between these different aspects of God? The idea of God existing as a 3-in-1 relationship suggests to me a dynamic, fertile and even dare-I-say juiciness within Godself. Does this sound too racy? I think it makes God infinitely more interesting, and relatable to me as a living human. BBZ suggests that “to believe in a triune God is to suggest that there is an inner relationship within Godself which spills over into the Christian life.” I love this image. “There is an inner relationship within God’s self which spills over into” our lives. We don’t have to constantly rev ourselves up, produce all this life-giving, inspiring, relational energy on our own. It’s already spilling over onto us from the 3-in-1 God! As I watched images of thousands of volunteers pouring into the storm devastated regions of Texas, I could see that life-giving, relational energy pouring out. God’s self of compassion spilling out over and through people digging through muddy debris, making meals, distributing supplies, comforting strangers.

One 8th century theologian, John of Damascus, put it this way: “There is an exchange of energy between the persons of the Trinity by virtue of their eternal love.” The Persons of the Holy Trinity metaphorically hanging around loving each other, grooving on each other. All this interconnectedness and intimacy and affection overflowing onto/into us! Hold that image in your mind’s eye the next time you look at one of your children, your grandchildren. Relational overflow! The next time you stare up into a tree or at the stars: picture the vibrating connections of this loving universal force, crackling back and forth. The next time you look at your face in a mirror: imagine not just energy, but the *affection* of God-in-three-persons spilling out of your eyes. Proverbs describes God and Wisdom constantly “rejoicing in God’s inhabited world and delighting in the human race.” And because this delight overflows onto us, we too can be creative and wise, just like God our Father/Mother who is the wise creator. We too can be helpers and peaceworkers in this world, just like God in Jesus our brother. We too can inspire and provide companionship to others, just like God in the Holy Spirit, which has been sent to us.

So when I think of the Trinity these days, I don’t see some dusty, outdated and irrelevant church doctrine. I get an image of powerful, even wild and unpredictable, love energy snapping between the synapses of God. Sizzling, vibrating connections between God the Father/Mother our Creator, God the Son, our Brother, God the Spirit. God existing as this overflowing, loving community. And all of us coming together as the faith community so we can experience this spilling out of God more intimately. Thanks be to God. Amen.