

“Trinity Sunday” by Marjory Bankson



June 7, 2020

Trinity

This week, our pandemic isolation has been upended by massive protests against systemic racism in this country. It feels like Pentecost to me. Something new is being born.

During the day, the slow-moving walks have been largely peaceful – a powerful demonstration of our First Amendment Rights by people who still trust that our legal structures will survive this President. At night, there has been some vandalism and violent clashes with police, but I also hear new strength in local leaders like DC Mayor Muriel Bowser and Bishop Marianne Budde. Something new is being born.

There is something very different about these demonstrations.

It is no longer primarily a black movement of protest, but a broader American movement toward justice for all people.

Like the crowds gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost, we can see incredible diversity among the protesters: black, white and brown; male, female and other identities; young and older – but mainly young. Perhaps young people feel more free of the pandemic threat. Perhaps they feel injustice more keenly. Or the President's heavy-handed tactics have awakened their resistance. I'm grateful for their courage — and their use of face-masks.

As the world looked on, we saw the President march across Lafayette Square to St. John's Church for a photo op, where he brandished a Bible – though he did not open it or pretend to pray. For him, the Bible was a symbol of domination, not the servanthood of Jesus. Looking at the scene through the lens of Pentecost, I saw the old “domination system” trying to quell a deeply spiritual movement – to bring justice, claim mercy, and walk humbly with God.

Not only is this movement about ending police brutality and racial profiling, but I sense there is real support for greater voting access, better schools, safe housing and basic medical care. The November elections will be crucial – AND we can expect continued efforts by those in power to keep voters from the polls. All of this feels like Pentecost to me. Something new is being born.

Today is actually Trinity Sunday, the Sunday after Pentecost in the liturgical year. In liturgical churches, where the Nicene Creed is recited every week, the Trinity is named as Father, Son and Holy Ghost. In more inclusive churches, like Seekers, we name the Trinity as Creator, Christ and Holy Ghost. It's that *ghostly presence* that I want to speak about this morning.

Trinity Sunday is not something that most Protestants are used

to celebrating. In fact, in the staid Presbyterian Church of my youth, we were highly suspicious of the Holy Spirit because it smacked of speaking in tongues, being “slain in the spirit” and other unseemly behavior. We were wary of too much joy, spontaneous prayers, and, I dare say, too much empowerment for ordinary people. We tacitly understood that the Holy Spirit didn’t behave properly – that it would “blow where it would.” Deep down, we knew the Holy Spirit was too democratic, too inclusive, too feminine, and not bound by church rules. Looking back, I think our emphasis on decorum cloaked a certain fear of the Spirit’s power.

As a somewhat mystical teenager, I knew not to talk about the Spirit’s presence in my life – but I could feel her breath in the beauty of nature – in the glad colors of Spring flowers, the rich harvest of berries and beans in the Summer, and the scarlet blaze of maples in the Fall. Nature spoke to me of God’s creative energy. With the author of Genesis, I knew from the beginning that the natural world bears the fingerprints of God, and that at each stage of evolution, I could hear God say, “It is good. It is good.”

For me, the biblical mandate for dominion over the earth meant *stewardship, not domination.*

I will also say that, in my teenage years, the Holy Spirit whispered quietly to me in the darkness of a mortuary, where I confronted the mystery of life and death along with the music that I was practicing. Being close to death gave me a sense that my aliveness mattered, that my actions could make a difference. I wonder if we are seeing some of that on the streets right now. Sometimes death *quicken*s new life.

What I didn’t know then was that the Holy Spirit threads her way through the Hebrew Testament, as *the breath* of God and the wisdom of God, from Genesis and Psalms to Ezekiel and Malachi – long before Jesus was born. For Jews who believed in One God and not many, the Holy Spirit was *not a problem*. She inspired

artisans and guided kings, gave prophets their powers, and sent dreams to troubled warriors.

But the death and resurrection of Jesus created a theological question.

Was the Holy Spirit now Jesus in a different form? Or was Christ a special form of the Holy Spirit? Did the Spirit confer special powers on certain people? Or was it a life-giving spirit poured out on all seekers, baptized Christian or not?

In our gospel reading for today, Matthew 28:16-20, Jesus appeared to eleven disciples after his resurrection and gave them what we know as “the great commission.” Matthew adds a cryptic note, saying some doubted. Why, we don’t know. But the message is clear:

“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

So, there you have it. The Trinity. Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Right there in scripture.

And remembering that the audience for Matthew’s account would have been acquainted with the Holy Spirit from their Jewish tradition, we don’t know how they understood this trinitarian formula, but they certainly understood what it meant to “obey everything that I have commanded you” – that is, to love one another as Jesus had loved his disciples – and they certainly understood “I am with you always” to mean that Jesus’ spiritual presence would be there, guiding, instructing, inspiring and revealing the true nature of God.

In the first century, when the followers of Jesus met in small house churches, the Spirit was seen primarily as the Risen

Christ, calling forth leaders from all walks of life: young and old, male and female, slave and free.

By the second century, debates sharpened about whether Jesus was fully human or fully divine. Hierarchies, headed by local bishops, formed in Rome, Alexandria, and elsewhere in the Roman Empire. Women were silenced. Workers were left out. Power and orthodoxy grew.

Finally, in 325, at the Council of Nicea, the bishops agreed that the Trinity referred to One God in three forms, not three separate entities.

Controversy over the Trinity is a fascinating thread in the tapestry of church history, but we'll save that for David Lloyd's course in the Fall.

However, we know from our own experience, that the Holy Spirit has never been explained by a doctrine. She has remained an enigma, quickening lives with the spirit of God inside and outside of the church.

This week, the Holy Spirit has been stirring again. Every day, peaceful protests form in our streets. People choose, against the autocratic actions of the President, to exercise their First Amendment rights as citizens of the United States. Every day, aware of the threat that the President may command U.S. troops to move against U.S. citizens, people gather to walk nine blocks and then kneel in honor of the time it took for George Floyd to die beneath a policeman's knee.

And this week, some courageous military leaders have broken their traditional *apolitical stance* to oppose what they see as *unlawful orders* to turn our volunteer Army against their fellow citizens. Admiral Mullen, General Mattis, and others have been clear and forceful about this misuse of military troops when there is no emergency and no request for such help by local officials.

Closer to home, many of you know that Peter served 21 years in the U.S. Army. He was committed to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States. Between his two tours in Vietnam, he taught ROTC at Dartmouth, where we were often targets for opposition to U.S. involvement in that war. And every week, Peter and I served on the staff of a coffeehouse which was patterned after the Potter's House here in Wash DC. The Ram's Horn was sponsored by the UCC church which we were part of then. The pastor at that church insisted that we treat each other as human beings, as children of God and not be dehumanized as political symbols. He made it safe for us to be there.

At the coffeehouse, we were encouraged to sit with customers and engage them in conversation. When his military service came up, Peter would often say "I'm in the Army so you can protest. The Constitution provides for both. We're in this together." And that, I think, was the Spirit speaking.

As followers of Jesus today, we will be looking for ways to embody God's spirit and dismantle the systemic racism that blights our common life.

Erica Lloyd's gospel reflection, which was posted on [InwardOutward.org](https://www.inwardoutward.org) yesterday, describes the process better than I can. "Am I the One?" she asks. Am I the one to help midwife this movement in this time and place?

Within our church and our local community, we will listen for the Spirit's guidance about where and how those systems of racial oppression and exclusion can be changed. Each of us has a piece of this larger work to do, right where we are. If Jesus is to have a body in this time and place, it will be us. It's the work of the Spirit, as we become the incarnation, here and now.

Something new is being born. The real work is just beginning.

And so we remember the words of Jesus from Matthew's gospel,

“I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

May it be so.

Amen.

Readings: Gen 1:1-2:4a and Matt 28:16-20