

## The Diversity of God?

Sunday, June 3

Trinity Sunday/Pentecost 2

Keenan's first day back

[Numbers 11.24-30](#), [John 16.12-15](#), [Romans 5.1-5](#)

sermon by Heather W. Reichgott

Before I say anything today, I want you to make some noise. Someone make a noise. Any noise. Now someone else. Go on, it's all right...

[when (if!) things have died down... make a couple comments about what they did.]

[if it sounded pretty unison, do it again but encourage different kinds of noises.]

In the Old Testament, when the Spirit comes upon people and they prophesy, it's a lot like that. A ton of noise. Chaos. They look and sound like crazy people, and it's a big crazy sound. The Spirit comes upon people and they go into a frenzy. Most of the time no one has any idea what they're saying.

In the New Testament, in the Pentecost story, the gift of the Spirit comes with another miracle: Everyone can understand what the disciples are saying. It's still a lot of noise, but everyone hears their own language clearly. It's not just an incomprehensible frenzy--it's the Spirit's gift of the gospel in the mother tongue of each hearer. It's the gift of communication in diverse languages at one time.

We need diverse voices in the church, and in all our communities. Stories about the Holy Spirit are usually stories about how much God loves diversity, and how God gives more and more people the ability to speak. [comment about something that happened in the noise exercise.] In this gathering, the church, we need many voices. We need all of your voices. We don't usually make a big noisy incomprehensible hubbub like we did today--we're not Pentecostals, although Darryl says he's starting to wonder about me! Presbyterians usually go for the more understandable kind of diversity. The New Testament kind, I guess. We ask for the Holy Spirit to gather us together and to make this diverse group of people into a community. In this church we get in a circle and listen to each other's prayers, which are all very different. During the summer we invite any of you to come up to this pulpit and give a Summer Sharing. By the way, we are taking signups for Summer Sharing... it is a great gift for this congregation to hear from you. You can give a sermon, or share a bit of your own personal journey of faith, or retell a Bible story creatively, or write poems... however it is that the Spirit might be leading you to share with this community. We do Summer Sharing during July and August.

The story from Numbers tells us about Moses. Now, if there ever was a person in the Bible who is famous as an individual, who is a hero all by his lonesome, it is Moses. Moses turned a river to blood, parted the Red Sea, led a people to freedom, is very often the one guy praying to God for the sake of his whole people. But even Moses needs some help. So God takes the Spirit from him and divides it among a whole lot of people. They prophesy when the Spirit lands on them. Eldad and Medad, who got lost for some reason, get the Spirit anyway and prophesy right where they are. It really is God doing it. It isn't just that Moses got tired and appointed some successors. God decided that 70 leaders were much better than 1.

Now, here's a question. What if it isn't just that God loves diversity? What if God is diverse, in God's own self?

Today is Trinity Sunday. Often when we try to think about the Trinity we get wrapped up in the numbers. Christian math:  $1=3$ ,  $3=1$ . Or we make it sound like a division of labor: Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. Which sounds more like 1 God with 3 different jobs... God takes turns as father and son with occasional freelance work as a small bird.

But the reason we have a doctrine of the Trinity isn't because God told us that God is THREE and also that God is ONE. The Trinity isn't even mentioned in the Bible in those terms. The closest we get is when Jesus says at the end of Matthew, "...make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." But, you know, if we didn't already know about the idea of the Trinity we'd just read that as three names.

The reason we have a doctrine of the Trinity is because of all these stories in the Bible that show us God being and acting in very diverse ways. God "sends" the Holy Spirit, in Numbers. Jesus prays to the God he calls Father, and Jesus breathes the Spirit onto the disciples. In the story from John, amid all those repetitive pronouns, we have Jesus, the God he calls Father, and the Holy Spirit, all acting differently. It sounds like they are different persons—they act more like different personalities cooperating with each other than like the same person. After all, Jesus isn't talking to himself when he prays: "Dear myself, thank myself for these disciples. Please glorify myself and send myself upon them to help them grow in love of myself. In the name of myself I pray, Amen."

So, it's stories like this that lead us to say Jesus is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, and while all being God, they have their own personalities, separate enough to interact with one another. So that God's own self is made up of relationship, relationship between persons who are truly different. At God's heart is diversity—different persons in a unity of love.

That's why we try to use different kinds of language for God, when we pray, when we sing hymns or when we write all those words in the bulletin. It's easy to get stuck with just one image, or one word even. Do we get stuck thinking of God as the old grandpa in the sky? Believing in a Trinity helps shake us out of that stuckness. Here in this congregation we care a lot about not insisting that God is male all the time. We believe God is beyond gender. But if we just settle down into saying the word "God" all the time, without varying the images, without talking about Christ or the Holy Spirit... well, many of us may just slide right back into imagining that poor old grandpa in the sky. Trying to imagine God with no images at all is hard too. C.S. Lewis said that he tried for a while to pray to God without any images at all. Taking the Second Commandment rather literally. He said it was like trying to pray to "a vast sea of grey pudding."

Recently the Presbyterian Church called for the writing of a special paper on the Trinity. They said we needed it because we were slipping into "functional unitarianism." It sort of sounds like a disease, "functional unitarianism." What it means is that if we forget about the Trinity we do tend to get stuck with those single images—the old grandpa, or maybe the sea of grey pudding—and that's what we pray to. But God is not that one grandpa or that one grey sea. To even catch a

tiny glimpse of who God is we need to pay attention to the relationship at the heart of God's own being. The relationship of Mother, Sophia and Breath of Life. Or Father, Son and Holy Spirit if you like. That's the diversity of God.

That Trinity paper was finished last year. It reminds us that Scripture has a vast wealth of images for the different persons of the Trinity. God is our Rock and our Redeemer. God is a Shield. Or a Shepherd, or a strong arm, or an eagle carrying her chicks on her wings. God is the Mother who taught Ephraim how to walk. Jesus is a good shepherd, a vine, the bread of life, the Word that God spoke, or Sophia (Wisdom.) The Holy Spirit is a dove, or fire. That's the diversity of God.

All this gets us to a place that might be somewhat troubling: the discovery that God is not one single, solitary, self-sufficient monarch on a throne issuing orders that must be followed. If God is a Trinity, God's own being is community, and the different persons are dependent on one another. Do you remember some of Jesus' prayers when he is desperate, even vulnerable, to the one to whom he prays? That kind of relationship is much more God-like than self-sufficiency is.

So we were created in the image of God, right?

We weren't created to be by ourselves.

God did not create just one Mega Super Invincible Human. God created a lot of us. And God created us with limits, weak spots, insecurities and needs. Especially needs for one another. God created us for the same kind of relationship, the same kind of diversity, that is at God's own heart.

Our need for one another might be the most Godlike thing about us.

We are unable to solve all our problems alone. We are incapable of controlling our surroundings. And that is exactly what God intended.

We are profoundly different from one another—and that is exactly what God intended.

That is the image of God in us—diversity, relationship, depending on each other and being dependable for each other... loving one another.

It's certainly tempting to try to be the masters of our own little universes. Sometimes we try to arrange our lives so that we will be like that single, solitary, self-sufficient monarch on a throne issuing orders that must be followed. Or we try to arrange our lives so that we just won't need any kind of help from anybody. Or we get scared of the profound differences between us and our neighbors, and we try to control our neighborhoods or our workplaces or our churches so that we won't have to be frustrated by the differences between us. It's harder to work with differences. It's harder to teach across a language barrier; to get along with new neighbors of a different culture; to understand the attitudes of someone from another economic class. It's harder to understand our own children who are from another generation and raised in a totally different situation than we were.

And... this is what we were created for. We were created in God's image—diversity, relationship, love.

We were created to speak to many different kinds of people, as the Spirit gives us ability.

We were created to share the burden of leadership with our Moseses, even if it means the occasional chaotic moments of prophesying in the camp.

We were created to be a wondrously variegated church, a delightfully diverse community, a

people of differences and of relationship.

Look around at who the Spirit has brought here.

It's pretty incredible.

Go forth and discover more of those marvelous differences. And may just a little of God's own Spirit be in each one of our relationships with each other.