

Trinity Sunday June 7, 2020
The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

A Message of Love and a Prayer
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

Jesus said, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."
Matthew 28:20

Today is Trinity Sunday, a day the Church sets aside for us to reflect on the three-in-one nature of God. Even under the best circumstances, preachers often complain about preaching on Trinity Sunday because the Trinity is considered more of a doctrine than a story in the Bible. Besides that, there is the old saying you cannot preach on the Trinity without preaching heresy. So, no pressure.

But Trinity is actually more than a doctrine. It is a Mystery, a way of noticing how God engages reality. And that can be hard to pull apart, explain, or even describe. It's really a whole picture thing instead of a few lines of scripture thing. Sometimes, the best way to approach a mystery, especially a holy Mystery, is through a story. Stories have the ability to help us let our guard down, to be less sure of what we know for sure and therefore more open to receiving something deeper than what we knew. Stories can help us grow. That might be why Jesus told so many of them.

The story I want to share with you today was written in 1992. At the time it was a story about environmental awareness, but it came to mind this week as I prayed about the Trinity amidst another complicated week of events in our country. As I read it today, I see in it a Trinitarian message. It was written by storyteller Douglas Wood, and is illustrated with amazing watercolors by Cheng-Khee Chee. The story is called *Old Turtle*, and I encourage you to read the book, not just my summary as follows:

Our story begins back when the earth was so new the animals and the rocks and the trees and the wind could speak and understand each other. But as they talked, their words turned into an argument about God. Everything saw God as part of itself but not anything else. The trees argued God was like a tree, a part of the earth, always growing. The fish said God could only be found in the deep waters of the sea. Rocks stated God was firm and settled just like them. Animals that could run fast said God was swift and always moving with them. The stars said God was cold and shining from afar. The ants said God was always close by, like a favorite smell. On and on the earth argued with itself about where God was and who God was, always claiming God was just like their small part of the earth.

The argument was interrupted by the wise character Old Turtle, who seemed to be ancient even when the earth was new. Old Turtle told the birds and ants and mountain tops and stars and fish and rivers and all the animals and trees that God was a part of and with them all, all at the same time. Old Turtle also said that there was going to be more to the earth, a new family of beings called people. Old Turtle said these people were going to be pretty amazing. They would come in many different colors and shapes and have different ways of speaking and thinking. They would be strong and tender, creative, powerful and vulnerable. People, Old Turtle said, “will be a message of love from God to the earth, and a prayer from the earth back to God.”

“And the people came.” They were everything Old Turtle said and more. But as tends to happen with us human beings, the people forgot. They forgot who they were. They forgot they were a message of love and they forgot they were a prayer from the earth. They forgot their connection to God and each other.

But that didn’t stop the people from arguing about God. They argued so hard sometimes they began to fight about who knew God, who didn’t; where God was and wasn’t. It got so bad the people abused their powers and exploited their vulnerabilities, they hurt one another, they killed one another, and they hurt the earth. All because the people could not remember who they are and where God is.

Until one day a voice said, “Please stop.” The voice seemed to come from the mountains who said, “God is swimming in the dark, blue depths of the sea.” Or maybe the voice was coming from the ocean who said, “God is among the snowcapped mountain peaks.” Perhaps the voice was from the stone who said, “I can feel God in the wind as it dances by.” Or maybe it was the wind who said, “I feel God’s presence among the rocks and stones.” It could have come from the star who said, “God is very close.” Or the ant who said, “God’s love touches everything.”

“And after a long, scary time,” Douglas Wood writes, “the people listened, and began to hear. And to see God in one another and in the beauty of the earth. And Old Turtle smiled. And so did God.”

I love that story. Did you notice how in the beginning of the story, the parts of the earth could only see God in their part of the world? That was their argument. That God was with them and nowhere else, it sounded like

competition. Until wise Old Turtle helped them see God is not limited to one place. God is with all that God has made. And the parts of the earth did more than just find comfort in being right that God was with them. They began to see and recognize God where they were not. When the people forgot they were a message of love from God and a prayer from the earth to God, it was the earth itself who showed the people how to listen, observe and recognize God in each other; and this listening, hearing, recognizing is something vital and strong and is what connects us to each other, to the earth, and to God.

That is where I see the Mystery of the Trinity in the story. It is in recognizing God in the other, not just in ourselves. In the last line in today's Gospel, Jesus said those wonderfully comforting words, "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Sometimes we can be like the people in the story and forget that those words of Jesus were not meant for you or me personally and for no one else. I've encountered people who quote me that line from Matthew's Gospel as a way of arguing that because Jesus is with them, Jesus is on their side, and therefore whatever they do is right and justified and if I don't do what they do or believe what they believe, I am wrong. That is the type of forgetting that can lead to competition and division; the disconnection from God Jesus came to restore and the Holy Spirit keeps that connection going.

Trinity is a way of reminding us when Jesus talked about God, he often talked about being sent from the Father, and he will be sending his disciples the Holy Spirit and they are somehow together; there is unity in relation or relationship. That is the holy relationship, the holy unity, we were created to be part of. Remember in the book Genesis, back in the beginning, God made humanity – all of humanity- in God's Image, to be part of God and part of creation. I love how Douglas Wood expresses it: "to be a message of love to the earth from God and a prayer from the earth to God."

As beautiful as that is, it can be so easy to forget. Especially when we encounter temptations to be part of power, to compete for attention, or when we are called to look at something that is difficult to take in or accept, like the changes an invisible virus is causing in our world; changes we don't want to accept because it means letting go of some conveniences or traditions we like. Or how the legacy of slavery can still dehumanize people of color with the lie of inferiority and dehumanizes white people by turning us into monsters who will

use any means necessary, including violence and oppression, to keep the lie alive. Or how we forget we are a prayer from the earth and instead see the earth as a resource to exploit.

These are just a few painful examples of what we see every week in our country, our town, the world. But the good news of Trinity Sunday is we can remember whose we are and where God is. And when we remember, when we learn to listen once again to the earth, to each other, and to God, when we remember to see and recognize God in each other, when we realize we don't have to compete for attention, we can work together and collaborate, we can let go of what can cause harm, that is when there can and will be healing of our souls, our society, our county, the world, and the earth. We will be part of the healing, when we learn to let go of fear, recognize God in each other and remember to trust God, who made all things and made all people and holds us all through these and all times.

On this Trinity Sunday, I hope you remember what you are and whose you are. I hope you listen. I hope you hear. Remember: you are a message of love from God to the earth and a prayer from the earth to God. And please remember, it isn't only you. Everyone you see, everyone you meet; the people you like, the people you don't like, the people who look different from you, the people who believe differently from you, all of us were made to be a message of love and a prayer. I pray we begin to listen and recognize God in each other so we can begin the work of love, the work we were created for.