

“CO-MISSIONED”
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Matthew 28:16-20; 2 Corinthians 13:11-3
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During high school, I ran on the cross country team for two seasons. I was never one of the fastest runners, but I enjoyed the exercise that running gave me; and I enjoyed the quiet time offered by the required miles. Quiet time to think, quiet time to consider not just whether I was ever going to make it to the end of the five miles but also to think and talk with God: to think and talk in my head about my questions, my classes, my friends. . .time to be alone. But as I ran alone through the neighborhoods of Spokane, I was also running with the members of my team. Sometimes we would talk; other times we would simply run along side each other, talking only when someone started to struggle. Only another mile, you can make it. We ran as individuals; in cross country you run as a team, but only the individual can make his or her legs work. . . only the individual can put in the training miles. And then on meet days, each person runs their race. The top five runners for each time score points based on their finish positions, and the team with the lowest total is the winner. Cross country is an interesting sport because it throws together a group of athletes who are competing individually and transforms them into a team based on their combined results. Placing high is important but, in the end, consistency across the whole team is ultimate goal. I enjoy sports like cross country because it is both an individual event and a team sport. Both matter in equal ways: individual performance matters but only to the degree it helps the team. Together the runners share a mission: finish fast; but the team only succeeds when all five runners do well. The mission is shared.

Today, on Trinity Sunday, we look at our God with a special focus on the interconnectedness of the Trinity’s three parts: Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. This Sunday is an opportunity to draw connections and celebrate the fullness of God. On Christmas we celebrate the coming of the Christ child, and on Pentecost we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit; and we always celebrate the presence of God. Our scripture lessons today include the very first chapter in the book of Genesis, the closing words from the gospel of Matthew, and Paul’s benediction from his second letter to the church at Corinth. One beginning and two endings: three lessons to choose from on Trinity Sunday. It is perfect math, isn’t it? A perfect blend of new and old, good and evil; but always, there is connection.

On this Trinity Sunday, I am still hearing the echoes of the faith statements shared by our confirmation class last week. Several of the confirmands noted that they struggled with how to describe God or understand the miracles of the Bible when their scientific minds lead them to believe that some of the biblical teachings are exaggerated or were written in a time with different understandings of how things happen. This is the reality of our time; as rational beings with many answers given to us by science, we are a skeptical bunch.

And so, for many of us, we come to the Trinity and all its tradition and history with a bit of trepidation. We don't want to disregard or question this fundamental doctrine; but we also don't dare attest too loudly to its truth. One thing that is two other things simultaneously? We know that can't really happen, right? Perhaps we've heard one of the classic ways to describe the possibility of the Trinity: running water, water frozen as ice, and vaporized water in the form of steam. One thing, but three forms. It can happen; or is that too cute and too easy for us? The truth of the matter is that as we celebrate Trinity Sunday we each come with different understandings of the parts of the Trinity. But I submit to you that the Trinity's power is not in the doctrinal regurgitation of the Triune God; instead, the power of the Trinity is in the many ways we can describe and know God—and, in the many ways that God comes to know us. Too often the question about the Trinity is phrased this way, "How can one thing (God) be three?" My simple response is to ask whether three is really enough? Rather than trying to figure out how God can possibly be three things, I often find myself asking, "How can I possibly contain God in the Trinity or in any formula?"

Let's start at the beginning, in Genesis. The magnificent creation story of the first chapter of Genesis is about giving order to the world.

"In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light."

And so the universe is created, light and dark, heavens and earth, water and land, animals and humans. This is God's creative tour de force as every possible thing comes into being, and we glimpse God as the benevolent giver who has unending power to create but, in the end, turns over the whole of creation to people like us—not just people like us but, indeed, to us.

"Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." And so we have God, the Creator, the One in whose hand the cosmic paintbrush of creation resides. Our scientific minds want answers; but even when we begin pulling apart and defining the parts of DNA strands, can we really believe there isn't some external force, some blessed and creative voice that is leading, assisting, or guiding the mystical and magical events of a creation that never seems to stop?

And then, after being created in the image of God—created in the image of the One who creates—we are charged with the care of the land and the animals. We all know the story of the first chapter of Genesis. God worked for six days and then rested. Creation was done. Let me just say it out loud: call me a heretic if you will, but God had the easy part. Sure, somehow God pulled together the whole universe, but now *we* have to take care of it. Fill the land, subdue it, have dominion over everything; while God has been relaxing in the glow of creative genius, we've been out here living. And quite frankly, it could be argued that it isn't working out so well. Global warming, water shortages, pollution,

fossil fuel shortages—the list is long and painful. But in many ways even this painful list offers a glimpse at the beauty of God the Creator: the Creator God acts, and then entrusts the rest to us. We share in the creative action; we are the co-creators: fumbling and bumbling; abusing the land, loving the land, filling it, subduing it, planting new trees, hoping that we haven't destroyed the salmon—co-creators with God. In the good, and in the ugly, here we are, trying to live faithfully.

The second passage today is the gospel reading, one of the most problematic texts in the entire Bible. These closing verses in the Gospel of Matthew contain what is known as the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, . . .and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.” Even reading these words at times makes me squeamish because I know how these words have been used. I know there have been times when people were asked whether they wanted to be baptized, or whether they wanted to be killed. I know missionaries have gone into countless nations bringing Bibles and offering food to those who would repent and would say they want to be a Christian. I know, too, that our own denomination has apologized for the way in which our missionaries treated the native people of Hawaii. The words of the Great Commission have been dangerous, and they still are! How do we view the Great Commission when we live in a multi-cultural context? What about my Jewish neighbor? What about the Islamic family next door? The wican? The Native American? What does it mean to go and make disciples?

And that is our question. Our book of worship suggests that this text be used for ordinations because it speaks to the faithful call of disciples who follow in the path of Jesus. But I, and many who are being ordained, choose not to include this passage because of the cultural problems that have arisen in trying to live out the words. But we can't just ignore them, and so we hear them today. On Trinity Sunday we recognize the brilliance of the ministry of Jesus. We recognize the human face of Jesus and the task that was given to the first disciples in the aftermath of Christ's death and resurrection. Go for it disciples, we say. I'll be a cheerleader for those long ago disciples, that is easy. But we also hear this passage and cringe when we think about doing it ourselves.

But before we get too down on this passage, let's re-examine it. As much as I struggle with what this passage seems to require, I think we need to contextualize it. “Go and make disciples, baptizing in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. . .” This is a mission statement, the mission statement for the future followers of Jesus. Mission statements are meant to serve as an overview of an organization. In succinct ways, mission statements describe what an organization stands for, and that is what this statement is: Jesus describing who the church should be. But in this general statement, we miss the specifics; and so, too, have many of us and many of our faithful ancestors as we—and they—have tried to follow the mission statement offered by the risen Christ at the end of Matthew's gospel.

But this isn't just about the end of Matthew's gospel; it is about the whole gospel, so we must hear the other parts, too. Go and baptize in the name of the Father and the Son and

the Holy Spirit. . .in the name of the One who commanded, “Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you (5:44).” In the name of the One who said, “Ask, and it will be given you (7:7).” The One who said, “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice (9:13).’” The One who said, “Come to me all who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest (11:28) .” The One who said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me (16:24).” And so much more. The Great Commission does not leave us with commandments to go and provoke, to go and coerce; instead, it leaves us with the knowledge that we are to teach and act and share the gospel that Jesus Christ lived and proclaimed so that we, and those with whom we interact, might know the grace, love, and fellowship of God. This is not to be a coercive act; rather, it is to be an act of love.

But this act of love required the disciples—and it requires us—to do something, not to just be cheerleaders for long ago disciples . Because the life and ministry of Jesus effectively ends if Christ’s mission does not also become our mission. And that is what Paul was telling the church at Corinth: encourage and care for one another; put things in the correct order with God at the forefront. Love one another and know that God is with you all. The Great Commission and Paul’s letter serve as a welcome and a job description.

But this job comes with a unique promise: “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” This is the promise of the Holy Spirit. God is with us in the form of the Creative One who continues to put new leaves on trees, who continues to put words of faith in the mouths of those young and old, who continues to bring new life into the world in spite of all that we do to get in the way. And so, we are here to live out the great commission: Charged to continue to live not by ourselves, not by running a race in the quiet desolation of our own minds and bodies, but, instead, to live fully by the teachings of Christ and to share in the creative process that builds the kingdom of God—in this city, in this time, and forever more.

As we celebrate and explore the meaning of the Holy Trinity, we celebrate and explore our very existence and our unending connection to the One who welcomes us into the creative process. It isn’t ours alone, but it isn’t God’s either. May the Holy Spirit guide us as we move forward. It is our co-mission—together with God and each other. Let’s get to work. Amen.