

Trinity Sunday – June 12, 2022
John 16:12-15

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

As most of you know, Helen and I are just back from an almost three-week trip to Italy. Last Sunday at roughly this time (plus seven hours) we were privileged to attend the choral mass at St. Mark's Basilica in Venice. The irony of attending a service in a language we do not know on Pentecost Sunday of all Sundays was not lost on us. But they did supply English translation of the readings, so we were able to understand at least that much. And of course since we use roughly the same liturgy as the Roman Catholic church it was easy to tell what we were doing at every point along the way. I wish I could figure out what setting of the mass was sung. It was maybe Palestrina, and if not Palestrina then something quite like him. That will mean something to some of you. Our choir sang a Kyrie by Palestrina three months ago, back on the first Sunday in Lent. At any rate, attending this service was one of the highlights of our vacation. The choir, which we could not really see from where we sat, filled the space with sound while our eyes took in the gold and mosaic-covered walls and domes of the medieval church. Four centuries before Phil Spector created the "wall of sound" in popular recorded music, Palestrina was creating walls of sound with the human voice alone. To hear it sung in a vast, reflective space like St. Mark's Basilica is an out-of-this-world kind of experience. And that is kind of the point, of both the architecture and the music: to draw us symbolically and spiritually out of our mundane existence and into the realm of the divine. It was also the perfect thematic start to our week in northern Italy, where we would be immersed in the art and architecture of the Renaissance. And here is where the connection to Trinity Sunday comes in, which we are observing today. The doctrine of the Trinity is the church's way of speaking about and naming God, whom we have come to know as both the creator and sustainer of the universe and who also, in Jesus, has become fully invested in and connected to what has been created, including us human beings. It is a way of speaking and thinking that keeps the divine and human connected without one eclipsing the other. It is paradox and tension; both/and. And that is also what makes it difficult and confusing sometimes. It's no wonder that in the history of the church we have tended to swing back and forth between emphasizing the divine and the human, between focusing on God and focusing on the created world. The Renaissance, as you may know, was the transitional period between the Middle Ages and the modern world, and it was one of those swings in emphasis. It was characterized by a recovery of classical Greco-Roman philosophy, art, and architecture, and particularly by a focus on the human as opposed to the divine. This is perhaps most clearly seen in the depiction of the human body in art, with an emphasis on realism, capturing true-to-life images of people's faces and bodies in contrast to the more stylized medieval depictions. This was not yet a move to secularism, which came in later centuries. It was a development that was embraced and supported by the church of the time. And rightly so. Taking the human element seriously not only in music, art, and architecture led to the Reformation focus on the recovery of scripture as a human vehicle for the divine message – reading it in context and catching its intended meaning.

Speaking of which, we have three readings before us this morning – four, actually, if you include the psalm – that each convey the divine and human tension and connection encompassed in the doctrine of the Trinity. Our first reading from Proverbs speaks in the voice of Holy Wisdom, proclaiming God's connection to and delight in the created world from the very beginning of the universe. God not only does amazingly complex and mighty deeds, but is also

invested in the results. And God wants us to know about that – that’s part of the connection. God wants us to know of God’s love and care for us and the created world, so that we too may delight as God delights, and so that we may love as God loves. Psalm 8 also gives us both amazement at the beauty and majesty of creation and an awareness of God’s regard for us human beings. Although we are a part of creation – mere mortals, says the psalmist – God has made us to be a connection, a nexus, between the creation and God, and God’s instruments for caring for the world, which includes caring for one another.

Our second reading from Romans and our Gospel reading from John spin out this connecting task of ours in terms of our ongoing relationship to Jesus, God’s love incarnate, and the second person of the Trinity. By the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, we have continual access to Jesus and the grace of his death and resurrection that repairs and strengthens our relationship with God. Our sin is forgiven, our mortality and weakness are overcome. And we trust these promises through faith that God the Holy Spirit creates in us.

Helen and I left St. Mark’s Basilica last Sunday on a high, ready for our encounter with Renaissance Humanism in both Venice and Florence over the next four days. Immediately next door to St. Mark’s Basilica is the Doge’s Palace, where we were confronted by the secular wealth and power of the first modern state, the Venetian Republic, in its heyday. The palace was full of huge, elaborately decorated halls with lots of paintings and lots of gold. And weapons, and armor, and other symbols of human power and might. It was an unmistakable celebration of human achievement. And while the divine element was not entirely absent, it was clearly now being used in the service of a human agenda.

All of this is very interesting to people like me who are interested in history and who have recently returned from a long-overdue trip to see Italy and its historical treasures. But it is also relevant to all of us here in the early 21st century. The spirit of our time has definitely swung in the direction of the human and away from the divine, and in some ways it’s part of a big swing that began with the Renaissance. As I have already said, that is not in and of itself necessarily a bad thing. God too in the creation of the world and in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus has also swung in the direction of humankind, you might say. That was the emphasis of the Reformation, and our continued emphasis when we remember our roots. Our task as the church, our duty and our delight, as our Eucharistic prayer puts it, is not to swing the pendulum back in the other direction as some of our fellow Christians seem to want to do. It is instead to bear witness to God’s ongoing creative, redeeming, compassionate, and sustaining work in the midst of and sometimes in spite of our human agendas. We may not have the people or the resources here at Grace to put on an ethereal sixteenth-century setting of the mass – although I’m sure it could sound pretty amazing in this room if last month’s concert was any indication. But we do assemble here each Sunday to be drawn out of our mundane existence and into the realm of the divine, to be reminded of God’s persistent care for us and all creation, God’s persistent love and forgiveness in Jesus, and God’s persistent empowerment to be who we were created to be: agents of God’s care, forgiveness, and empowerment for the whole world. That’s what the Doctrine of the Trinity is all about when it comes right down to it. We are drawn in to be sent out as agents of God’s loving purpose for all of creation. May the Triune God grant us grace to be faithful to that mission, and may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.