

“I-Thou . . . Us, Together”

June 11, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania
Trinity Sunday, Year A

Text: “Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”

2 Corinthians 13:11-13; NRSV



Image Credit: http://www.thecostofliving.org.uk/simonbale/stjohnshighbridge/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Holy_Trinity.jpg

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

Today is Trinity Sunday! This is not a celebration of our particular church in Butler, PA, but of the God who is Lord of it. The image above is emblematic of this day; an image is a visual metaphor; it suggests something else, it points to something else.

This particular image comes from a stained glass window in St. John’s Anglican Church in Highbridge, Somerset (South West), United Kingdom. Notice that the whole of the image is

encircled with the words "Holy," "Holy," "Holy." These words lead us back to the great song of praises mentioned in both Testaments. These are the words that open the great hymn we sing today: "Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord, God Almighty." Within this circularity are symbols to each person of the Godhead coming together and each bearing circle-crosses: At the top, God, the Father, is referenced with two words. The first of these is the word "YHWH" – the Divine Name – a name so sacred to Jews that it is rarely uttered. Some Orthodox sects of Judaism even take out the vowel in the English word "GOD" – "G_D" – to remind themselves of the holiness of the sacred name. These letters "Y"-"H"-"W"-"H" form the great name God gave Moses when the latter asked of the Lord, "When I appear before Pharaoh and he asks me who sent me, whom shall I say sent me?" And God said to Moses, "Tell him, 'YHWH' ('Yah-weh'), sent you." The word is a form of the Hebrew verb "to be" – "I am who I am", "I will be who I will be."ⁱ

Underneath these letters is the second word in the form of the letters "A"-"B"-"B"-"A" – "ABBA" . . . No, this is not a reference to the Stockholm singing group of the Seventies, but the word is a familial form of the Semitic word for Father – "Ab". "Abba" is a more intimate word of relation, akin to "Dad" or "Daddy." This is the word Jesus taught the disciples to use in the Lord's Prayer, saying "When you pray . . . say 'Abba' . . . "Our Father . . ."ⁱⁱ

In these two words we have a fusing of the unlimited, boundless, God-over-all-gods who is also able to be approached in very intimate terms of personal relationship. These two are brought into proximity by a raised hand that is signing a kind of priestly blessing; bestowing favor on the one being blessed.

The cross-circle that appears at the lower left bears the image of a lamb, holding a cross flag in its mouth and standing on a book. The Lamb, of course, is a symbol of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, who, in the last pages of the New Testament is the One to whom the heavenly choirs and cohorts sing:

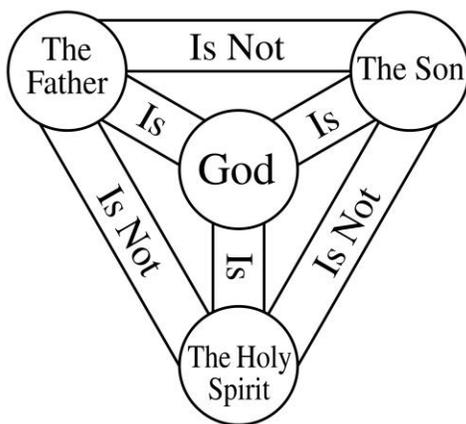
*"Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered
to receive power and wealth and wisdom
and might and honour and glory and blessing!"ⁱⁱⁱ*

He is the very one to whom John the Baptist pointed, saying, *"Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."*^{iv}

Everything is pointing to something . . . Pay attention.

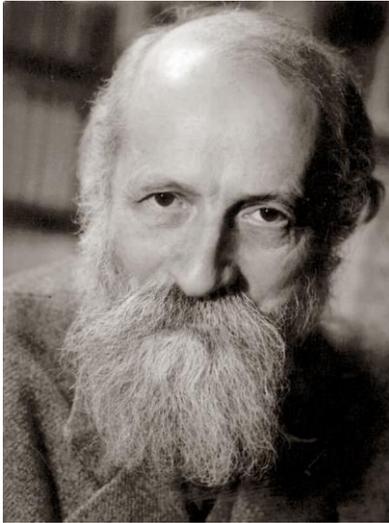
The cross-circle at the lower right is held by a dove, a traditional symbol for the Holy Spirit in his descent upon Jesus at Baptism. He is flying above seven tongues of fire that fall from him. These relate to both the "seven Spirits of God" alluded to in the Book of Revelations^v, and the descent of the Holy Spirit in tongues of fire as He fell among the disciples at Pentecost^{vi}.

These three circles all interconnect, forming a design known as a "trefoil." In mathematical terms, they intersect like a Venn diagram; the area of intersection is the basic design of our own Trinity Presbyterian Church's logo – called a "Triquetra" ("Three-cornered"), which has its roots in Celtic spiritual expression ("The Trinity Knot"). All of this is trying to speak to the viewer of this pretty glass window something about who God is; and each of these symbols express a relational aspect of doing something, being something together.



There is an old diagram that tries to explain the relationship of the Trinity of the Godhead: If you follow each line between and among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit you see the relationship: separate, but equal; One God, in three persons.

Augustine, the great Church Father of the 5th CY AD (CE), spoke of the relationship of the Trinity as one of eternal love: The Love of God – the Lover; the Son as the Beloved; the Holy Spirit as the loving dynamic between and among them all.^{vii} This is a hard concept to get a hold of . . .



The man pictured on the left is the great Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, born in 1878, he lived until 1965. . . Imagine what he saw in his lifetime, given the span of years his life represents!

Martin Buber was a great and compassionate man with a fine mind who thought long and hard about the nature of relationships. He believed that the only lasting relationship; the only truly meaningful relationship is that of I

(me) – Thou (you).

In speaking of this he contrasted other kinds of relations. He said we can make of relationships "I-It" – the "It" being the objectification of another (for whatever reason). Have you ever objectified anybody? I-It is not about relationships, but is simply identifying something to be possessed, or obtained . . . A good example of this, from my experience as a college professor, is often seen outside of dorms and college classrooms on a beautiful spring day wherever young co-eds pass-by – the leering look of young males at co-ed bodies passing in the sunshine! Spring has sprung! I-It. . . We do it lots of different ways.

There is also the "I-Them" . . . Did you ever do that? *Those* people . . . *Them!* This is an expression of distance; something apart from me. I am not "them" – nor are they me . . .

Never of these provide a foundation for true relation. But the more I enter into relationship with the other, the more I bring the other into a relationship with my-Self; and in ways that ultimately have an impact on who I am, that person is a "Thou." Here are Buber's own words in speaking of this relationship:

"The basic word I-Thou can be spoken only with one's whole being. The concentration and fusion into a whole being can never be accomplished by me, can never be accomplished without me. I require a Thou to become; becoming I, I say Thou."^{viii}

I know that sounds complex and hard, but the point is that I am not complete until I am into the social connection with the Other – whoever that Other is!

I talk to my students about the power of the spoken word: I say to them this current culture is extremely "sight-based" – do you notice that? It seems as though everybody is viewing a screen! They may not have the sound on, but they are looking. But that only works if one can see what it is to be seen. If the sound is off and one is not looking, there is nothing . . . But I don't even have to be physically present with you; I can be out of sight, and I can call to you with my voice in a way that draws you to me; the spoken word has a power and an immediacy, I think, that is far more powerful than the visual because the spoken word can make my Self present in a way the visual image can never be perceived. As soon as I call out to another, or I am called, I have a choice to make -- the relationship is put in front of me – what am I going to do? The medium of sound makes present others in ways the visual cannot.

For Buber, he says, I am not fully complete until I have stepped into the midst of the people around me; and each of them has something to share with me in a way that I am not complete until that happens.

Here is another of his quotes: *"If you hallow this life, you meet the living God."*^x

That's good . . . those words echo the words of another Jewish theologian and contemporary of Buber, Abraham Joshua Heschel. Heschel said, *"Just to be is a blessing, just to live is holy."*^x There is something in the social aspect of who we are that somehow makes a difference that leads to blessing, leads to filling out our lives. It is not enough to objectify, it is not enough to put at a distance, the other; it is another thing entirely to step into communion.

We live a lot of our lives in isolation – and that is not the heavenly pattern; that is not God's way. God is relational! As it says on the front cover of your bulletin:

God is social, and so are we. The divine life is a dance party. When we join the party, when we enter into loving relationships, then we participate in the very life of the Triune God, in whom we live and move and have our being. We are created to participate in God's love, and we are created to share that love with others.^{xvi}

According to a study about trust, appearing in the Harvard Business Review in 2009:

"Within one hour of birth, a human infant will draw her head back to look into the eyes and face of the person gazing at her. Within a few more hours, the infant will orient her head in the direction of her mother's voice. And, unbelievable as it may seem, it's only a matter of hours before the infant can actually mimic a caretaker's expressions. A baby's mother, in turn, responds and mimics her child's expressions and emotions within seconds. In short, we're social beings from the get-go: We're born to be engaged and to engage others."^{xvii}

Buber says, I am not fully myself until I have reached out and engaged you because there is something about you that makes me more complete. He is not talking simply about marriage here, but the fundamental engagement of human-to-human – which he knows is a fundamental engagement of the Godhead – God desires to be reaching forward into relationship. . . . Buber was not a Christian, he was a Jew; but like his friend, Abraham Joshua Heschel, he knew enough to say that "God is in search of human kind"^{xviii} in order to be in relation with us. Paul, the Apostle, says, "*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.*"^{xix} -- That those fundamental activities of the Godhead, that are already social by nature, be present and among you here; that the Trinity of God find expression right here at Trinity Presbyterian Church!

We have a good name! And ought to mean at least that much in how we express our lives together. God is at work gracing us through Jesus, loving us in the fundamental relationship as "Abba", then fellowshiping with us through the power of the Holy Spirit.

"Every striving of our souls for union, every reaching out for companionship, every urge for a hug or an embrace, every act of love gives indirect testimony to the Trinity. The Trinity says that God is community, and that we seek. The Trinity says that God is relationship and that we search for. The Trinity says that God is love and so we yearn for love. We can't help ourselves. We're made in that image and likeness. We mirror our origins.

So if someone asks you to explain the Trinity, you can respond without hesitation: 'the trinity is the relationship of God the Father with God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. And because I have been created in the image and likeness of God, I can only exist in relationship with others. I am who I am because God is who God is.'^{xv}

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

ⁱ This incident is recounted in Exodus 3:13-15.

ⁱⁱ See the three different accounts of this in Matthew 6:7-15, Mark 11:25, and Luke 11:1-4.

ⁱⁱⁱ Revelations 5:6ff; Scripture cited in sermon text: verse 12.

^{iv} John 1:29.

^v See Revelations 1:4, 3:1, 4:5, and 5:6.

^{vi} Acts 2:1-4.

^{vii} St. Augustine, *"On the Trinity,"* Basic Writings of St. Augustine, Volume 2, Ed. Whitney J. Oates (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992), 790; as cited by Margaret Manning in an article at <http://rzm.org/a-slice-of-infinity/love-lover-and-beloved/>.

^{viii} Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958, p. 11.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, p. 79.

^x Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom*, NY: MacMillan, 1955.

^{xi} The Rev. Dr. Joseph Pagano, in a sermon, *"A Glowing Oven Full of Love,"* at the Episcopal Network.

^{xii} *Ibid.*

^{xiii} Abraham Joshua Heschel entitled one of his most famous works, *"God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism,"* NY: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1955.

^{xiv} 2 Corinthians 13:13.

^{xv} Christopher Burkett at PreacherRhetorica, an internet blog: <http://christopherburkett.blogspot.com/>