

The First Sunday after Pentecost: Trinity Sunday
 St. Paul's Cleveland Heights
 June 15, 2025
 Stephen H. Applegate

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

Today is Trinity Sunday. Trinity Sunday is when we talk about what God is like. We do that every Sunday, of course – at least I hope we do – but on this particular Sunday we are invited to think together about one of the core doctrines of the Christian church – the idea God is three in one and one in three.

At [this service] or [the nine o'clock service] we'll baptize Samuel Francis Busa, pouring water over him while invoking the Trinity. Patricia, who is presiding at the service [will say] [said,] "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." What does it mean to call on the Trinity like this? And what can we say about the Trinity that has relevance for us in this parish church now?

During the last several weeks, the parish staff has done a lot of thinking about a theme for the new program year that will start in September. We've decided that we'll focus on Belonging.

There's plenty of reasons to focus on belonging. For one thing, the loneliness epidemic is a growing public health concern, with studies showing that a substantial portion of the American population experiences loneliness and isolation. Young people are especially vulnerable. Many factors have contributed to this trend, including the COVID-19 pandemic, changing societal norms, and the rise of technology. The lack of strong social networks and support systems also contributes significantly to loneliness.

When the Search Committee published the parish profile, they included some challenges and opportunities that face St. Paul's in the immediate future. One of the challenges they articulated was highlighted in a section they called "Connections and Care for One Another."

Here's what the committee wrote, "The congregation has a deep desire to form deeper connections and create more opportunities for members to develop meaningful relationships with the clergy (pastorally) and each other (e.g., small groups, nurtured friendships, shared meals)." So Belonging seems to be the right choice for a theme for the upcoming program year.

As the members of our excellent staff ruminated on the theme of belonging, one of them passed along an article to me entitled "The Crisis of Belonging." The article was actually an excerpt from a book by Eric Jacobsen called *Three Pieces of Glass: Why we feel lonely in a world mediated by screens*. After reading the excerpt, I immediately went out and bought the book.

Jacobson begins his book by talking about the old television program, "Cheers." Some of you may remember it. The show was about a bar in Boston with an ensemble cast that included the

people who worked there – the regulars who sat on the same bar stools show after show – and the occasional guests whose appearances kept the show running for 11 seasons.

The greeting given to one of the barflies, Norm, became a standard trope for the show. It fit perfectly with the chorus of the theme song, “You want to be where everybody knows your name.”

The theme song’s resonance with audiences was the main reason Cheers was so popular. In his book, Jacobson asks, “What specifically do we long for where everybody knows our name? Why do we seem to be moving further away from it each passing year?” Jacobson says the answer has to do with three pieces of glass: the car windshield, the TV, and the smartphone.

“These three pieces of glass,” Jacobson writes, “represent key choices we’ve made at the societal and individual levels to devalue face-to-face contact with other people for the sake of efficiency, autonomy, and entertainment.” I think he’s on to something.

What does any of this have to do with the Trinity? Let me answer this question by talking about a serious, deeply theological book written by the Brazilian theologian and writer, Leonardo Boff. Boff is a former Franciscan friar who has published widely and has written extensively in the field of Liberation Theology. He is brilliant and controversial. Both his brilliance and his willingness to provoke controversy have landed him in frequent trouble with the Roman Catholic Church.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith went as far as to silence Leonardo Boff for an entire year back in 1985 – at a time when Cardinal Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict, was in charge of it.

The book I’m referring to is the book called *Holy Trinity: Perfect Community*. In the book, Father Boff talks about the doctrine of the Trinity and how the doctrine helps us see that, in the beginning was “the communion of the Three, not the solitude of the One.” Boff is saying, in other words, that the very nature of God is community – that God not only belongs to a community, God is community

Using the classic language of the doctrine of the Trinity – God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Boff asks, “How has the Father of infinite kindness been revealed? How has the Son, our brother, been revealed? How has the Holy Spirit, our strength, been revealed?”

He answers these questions by writing that the Blessed Trinity is the communion (or community) of life and love among the divine three. This is how God has been revealed, he says, not as a solitary figure but as three persons in eternal communion with each other. At rock bottom, Leonardo Boff says, God is community.

Like the shamrock St. Patrick supposedly used when he was teaching the Irish about the Trinity, Boff tries to come up with a metaphor that we human beings can begin to grasp. Boff says that the Trinity is like three springs constituting one and the same lake. He says it is like three light bulbs constituting a single light.

Years ago, I once juggled three balls through an entire Trinity Sunday children's sermon. (I began to believe in miracles after the sermon ended without my dropping a single ball through the whole sermon.) All these metaphors are helpful, but none of them can begin to explain the mystery that is contained in the Doctrine of the Trinity.

In one of his books, the Episcopal priest, Robert Capon, says that when human beings are trying to describe God we are like a bed of oysters trying to describe a ballerina. We simply do not have the equipment to understand something so utterly beyond us.

Today, it's Leonardo Boff's metaphor of God as community that I want us to remember. Because, if the nature of God is "community," then it makes a difference for us poor "oysters." It means that when we are called into fellowship with God, we are also called to belong in fellowship with each other.

We are called to belong to the Beloved Community modeled on the beloved community that is God – a community of love and giving – a community of hope and joy – a community that's passionate for justice and truth – a community through which others can catch a glimpse of the very nature of God.

We, the people of God, are gathered in just such a community – right here – today. Some of us have been part of the St. Paul's community for many years, some have come to this lovely church for just this one Sunday for worship.

Whether you are part of this community for just this one day or have been part of this faith community for decades – the question must be asked – what kind of a community will you be at St. Paul's going forward? During the rest of the time of transition? And when your next rector arrives to be with you? If the very nature of God is community, how will St. Paul's reflect – to its neighbors – the community of the Trinity?

Here are my suggestions: If God is a community rather than a solitary ruler standing aloof above a static universe, it means there is, at the root of everything, an eternal process of life, of outward movement, of love. This community is invited to live this way, too. Belonging means sharing God's love at a time when this country and this world are being overwhelmed by hate – the kind of hate that fuels the violent antisemitism that recently snuffed out young lives in Washington and injured Jews who were demonstrating peacefully in Boulder, Colorado – the kind of hate that cruelly deports families and children without warning or due process – the kind of hate that has turned Gaza into a living hell – and the kind of hate evidenced in the shootings yesterday in Minnesota. All this hatred means, of course, that sharing God's love won't be easy and that we will encounter fierce resistance when we live as followers of the Risen Christ, disciples whose first allegiance is to the Kingdom of God, rather than to any nation or political party.

If within God there is equality and perfect communion, this community is invited to live in this way, too, especially as we celebrate Juneteenth this coming week during a time when our nation's leaders have scrubbed Black Lives Matter from the section of 16th Street NW near the

White House, and when they have sought to rename ships that were once christened with the iconic names of Black Americans: Harriet Tubman, Thurgood Marshall, and Medger Evers, not to mention others who have stood in solidarity with the marginalized: Harvey Milk, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Cesar Chavez, and Dolores Huerta. For St. Paul's to be Beloved Community must mean to oppose racism and bigotry in all its forms and seek liberty and justice for all.

If, in the Trinity, we find the best image of the church as community, St. Paul's is invited to live this way, too – a place capable of moral clarity and resolute commitment to justice – a place that can bring these strengths to bear in this gathering storm. Churches like ours, protected by the First Amendment and practiced in galvanizing people of goodwill, may be some of the last institutions capable of resisting the injustices we now see being promulgated. As our Presiding Bishop, Sean Rowe, wrote this week, “That is not a role we sought – but it is one we are called to.”

It is not my job as your interim rector to say exactly how the members of this community ought to do this. That's your job as lay persons! What I hope and pray is that you will draw strength and hope from the “unity in diversity” of the Trinity – the “one from many” that lies at the center of the universe – a unity of differences bound together by love so deeply transformative that this church, named for the Apostle Paul, will be a community with a rich and open shared life, one that respects differences and does good to all, and that places its abundant resources in the service of the poor, the sick, those persecuted and imprisoned, and the outcast.

Jesus teaches us that every human being God places in our path is our neighbor, and that our duty as his followers is to love our neighbors as ourselves.

If something like what I've been talking about happens, then [Samuel], the child baptized this morning in the name of the Holy Trinity and made a member of the Body of Christ, will be proud to say he belongs to St. Paul's. And you will be proud to say you belong to St. Paul's, too.

Amen.