

God's Answer to Our Branding Problem

By
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from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Trinity Sunday

Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31

Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? ²On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads she takes her stand; ³beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out: ⁴“To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live. ²²The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. ²³Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. ²⁴When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with water. ²⁵Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth— ²⁶when he had not yet made earth and fields, or the world's first bits of soil. ²⁷When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep, ²⁸when he made firm the skies above, when he established the fountains of the deep, ²⁹when he assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, ³⁰then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, ³¹rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

¹¹Finally, 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.

¹²Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. ¹³The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

This headline seemed to shout at me, because about a dozen folks made sure I saw it: *Christianity's Got a Branding Problem*. Opinion writer, Jessica Grose, who writes about American family life, culture and politics had done her research. Just a month ago, she asked her readers about America's declining religious observance and got nearly seventy-five hundred responses within 24 hours. Her readers said they still believe in God but have become less religious over time. Many are frustrated that a form of Christianity has come to identify with extreme political maneuvers that are turning back the clock on women's rights, voting rights, basic matters of equality, book banning. Hundreds of respondents noted the drift of their churches into more intolerant politics. Some who are affiliated with more progressive congregations specifically said the mere association of the word *Christian* with more evangelical conservatives and Christian nationalism was the root of their growing alienation from religion. For example, a formerly church-going woman from Kansas said she's just too angry with the so-called Christians in general, and what they are doing to our children and society, that she can no longer attend services. Our country is, as Grose describes it, "rife with ruptures." Then quoting one professor, who researches religion and secularity, summed it all up saying, "Christianity has a branding problem."¹

According to the Barna Group which researches religious and cultural trends, the primary reason Christianity has a "branding problem," is that younger generations – the Millennials and Gen-X'ers have found churches too judgmental and not welcoming of human differences. However, Barna's most recent polling data from young adults shows that the pandemic saw an increase in online attendance in these younger generations. Their researchers are now wondering if churches can, and will, shift their outlook to be more inclusive, more welcoming, less judgmental, more open to diversity - diverse lifestyles,

¹ Jessica Grose, "Christianity's Got a Branding Problem," *New York Times*, 5/10/23.

diverse sexual orientations and identities, diverse outlooks to better welcome all seekers.²

I hope that is what we at Bryn Mawr are trying to be – more welcoming of human diversity. But in general, if Christianity has a “branding problem,” in today’s fraught and divisive climate, which is far too often intolerant of diversity, God has an answer.

Because God actually models diversity, revealed to us in the three persons of the Trinity. Until you came into worship this morning, I am sure it may have slipped by you that today is Trinity Sunday. No one stopped by Hallmark this weekend to pick up a *Happy Trinity Sunday* card to send, and I imagine you’re not heading out to Brunch to toast the Trinity either. But long ago the church established the liturgical year in order to educate believers to understand the varied ways that God is revealed. Like stained glass windows which usually recount key biblical moments, the liturgical year was an early form of Christian education. We begin in Advent to follow the life of Jesus from the celebrations of his birth, through the seasons of his life, death and resurrection during Lent and Easter. Last Sunday we observed the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost, when the gathered believers are empowered to do the work of Christ himself. Today’s Trinity Sunday is a day set apart for the church to consider the doctrine of the Trinity. It has been called the great hinge, standing between the two halves of the church year. In the first half we have focused on the life of Christ, and now in the second half we focus on the life of the church, the community of believers and our mission in the world. Next Sunday we move into that long “green” season of “Ordinary Time,” to explore how our faith is lived out in our ordinary lives.

So, between the season of focusing on Jesus, and the stretch of Ordinary Time that focuses on the life of the church in response to Christ, on Trinity Sunday, we remember and celebrate how God is

² Barna.com.

revealed to us as one God in three persons. One God diversely revealed as Father, Son, and Spirit; as Parent, Child, and Holy Wind, each a unique glimpse into the Godhead, and together unified as one eternal being.

Now, this theological understanding about God's self-contained unity and diversity has been a perplexing debate since the beginning of Christianity. The great theologian Augustine of Hippo lived in the late 4th or early 5th century. One of Augustine's more memorable quotations said of the doctrine of the Trinity: "If you do not believe in the Trinity, you will lose your soul; if you try to understand the Trinity, you will lose your mind."³

Without losing our minds, I believe we can confess our inability to understand God fully, but also celebrate Trinity Sunday as a day to remember that our One God is both unity and diversity. Our first lesson speaks of the Wisdom of God. Wisdom herself speaks to us in first person disclosing some of the mystery and fullness of God. Wisdom identifies herself as being there from the beginning with God giving order to chaos, bestowing justice, blessing creation, and delighting in human community. Wisdom makes sure we know how impossible it is to pin God down. And yet, she also "delights in the human race," says Proverbs, drawing close to human existence. At the crossroads, at the gates of the town, where people meet to transact business, settle disputes, to meet for conversation, in every place where people come and go, God's Wisdom takes a stand and raises her voice. As in the beginning of creation, Wisdom is the presence of God giving order and structure to make sense of life in every sphere. According to the Bible, the big, unfathomable God in whom there is Creator, Wisdom, Spirit, Person, Redeemer, Risen Christ is greater than all creation... and yet, this complexity of God contains an intimate closeness, standing at the

³ Augustine quote from Maetta Snyder, Westminster United Presbyterian Church, Emporia, Kansas, "Searching for the Trinity," 6/10/01.

city gate where each of us comes in and goes out. This God is more concerned than we can imagine, more involved in our transactions than we dare think. In Wisdom is a picture of the diversity of God –in grandeur far away and intimacy close at hand.

Then, from the sweeping poetry of Proverbs, we move to Paul’s systematic summary of his experience of the revelation of God, in his closing benediction to the church at Corinth. He blesses them with *the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit*. Whereas Proverbs’ wisdom is all over the place rejoicing and delighting in all of creation and city life, here and elsewhere, Paul takes more measured steps to describe God in three specific persons. In Romans he writes: “We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ... God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” Three-in-One by name and function, Paul describes the Trinity. As the ancient scribe of Wisdom, so Paul was trying to explain to the infant church how God is revealed as one God, yet within God there is remarkable diversity.

In her book, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, Kathleen Norris muses about the meaning of the Trinity, saying: “*Trinity* has always seemed a word more strange than scary, although it has generated some of the most mind-boggling writing in all of Christian theology. Christianity, like Judaism, is a monotheistic religion, and the concept of the Trinity, in brief, is that the Godhead consists of a community of persons.” Then admitting that theological discussion of the Trinity leads quickly into the realms of ether, she offers a simple scientific analogy for understanding our Triune God. “For Christians, the Trinity is the primary symbol of community that holds together by containing diversity within itself...” Norris writes, “Although I have very little grasp of how science is done, I love to read about quarks, “those subatomic particles that exist in threes.” There is no such thing as one quark, but only three independent beings. I picture them dancing together at the heart of things,” she says, “part of the atomic glue that

holds this world together, and to the atomic scientist, at least, makes all things on earth more alike than different.”⁴

So in our current season of cruel intolerance, where diversity is too often a thing to be scorned or feared, isn't at least part of the answer to our branding problem God saying, “Look at me, the God of all creation. I spoke the earth into being and flung the stars against the heavens. I am Lady Wisdom, God's companion at creation, now standing at your city gate rejoicing and delighting in the human race. I was a Palestinian Jew from Nazareth, bound in a particular time and space and body; now resurrected and ascended, and I give you my Holy Spirit to empower you to be instruments of blessing for all of humankind.”

Friends, the unity of God is defined by diversity; that's the answer to our branding problem. We who call ourselves Christian share God's peace, extend God's love, and while around us others harm and divide, put down and exclude, we are called to accept and welcome, to heal and reconcile, to build up and give life. God not only created us to live in community, but to create community ourselves of diverse persons because that's who God is, within Godself. The celebration of Trinity Sunday is simply this: In the Wisdom of God, in the very heart of God there is not just an “I” but rather a “we.”

AMEN.

⁴ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*, p. 287.