

## HOLY TRINITY SUNDAY – JUNE 7, 2020

### INTRODUCTION

***I'm heartbroken.*** This has been a difficult week for our cities, our state, and now for our nation. On Memorial Day, George Floyd's life ended as the Minneapolis police arrested him and used what proved to be lethal force that ended his life. The video is horrifying to watch. George Floyd cried out, *'I can't breathe!'* before he died. The anger in the streets is justifiable. The outcry that started in southeast Minneapolis and St Paul's Midway district has now spread to other cities in our nation.

***I struggle with what is happening because I have been forced to admit that I am part of the problem.*** I am a privileged white male who reads stories in the media of men and women of color who are not only treated differently by their local police forces, but sometimes also killed because of the color of their skin. In actuality, there seems to be a double standard for policing. Governor Walz painfully acknowledged that this manifestation of racism is a Minnesota problem. And this is where it becomes personal.

***I am complicit in this problem.*** I heard these stories in the past, but I did not pay attention to the frequency with which they appeared. I have been blissfully ignorant of the depth of the problem. For this, I need the forgiveness of my brothers and sisters of color. I, along with many others, have let this get out of hand.

Last weekend just after the happenings on Friday night, I walked by a church in my Eastside neighborhood in St. Paul. Like the ***Bethel-Immanuel Lutheran Parish*** they are not having services because of Covid-19. Bordering on the main north-south thoroughfare, their members had made cardboard and crayon signs that carried messages of support for those who are hurting so deeply because of Mr. Floyd's death. One sign especially sticks in my mind. It read: ***If one can't breathe, none of us can breathe!*** I was overcome with a profound sense of grief and remorse.

The sign is right. ***If one can't breathe, none of us can breathe!*** We who follow Jesus know this to be true. In his First Letter to the Corinthian congregation, Paul talks about the Body Christ and how all parts of the body are equally valued. He reminds us that when one part is injured, the whole body suffers. There isn't much more that I can say right now. I am going to close with a brief meditation written by Bishop Ann Svennungsen. It is entitled: ***A prayer for Minneapolis.*** It was written after last Friday evening.

*“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not.”*

*We join Jesus' lament, keening at the brokenness – broken bodies, broken lives, broken systems. We plead for God to gather all people and all systems*

under her wings, empowering us in the hard work of justice and transformation.

By your Holy Wings, Mothering God . . .

- Enfold and comfort all who grieve the murder of George Floyd
- Tenderly care for those who've been traumatized once again by this death
- Spread your protection over all who tirelessly give themselves to provide care and comfort
- Prod the county attorney to swiftly prosecute the officers involved
- Sweep out the racism in our criminal justice system
- Uncover the sin of white supremacy that has plagued our city, state, country, and our individual lives
- Move us all to repentance, to radical change – joining hands with all to rebuild our communities in the way of justice
- Hover continuously over our city, inspire us with vision to imagine a new way of being community; and a new resolve to work toward that vision.

“Minneapolis, Minneapolis, O how Jesus longs for us to wake up, to name our sin, to see our complicity, to recognize every single person as a beloved sibling. The time is now.”

**In Christ ✝,**

**Pastor Steve**



**BISHOP THOMAS AITKEN'S LATEST PASTORAL LETTER ON COVID-19 AND RETURNING  
TO WORSHIP**



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**Pentecost**

**May 31, 2020**

Dear Congregations of the Northeastern Minnesota Synod,

Peace, hope and courage in Christ, our Lord.

**Your Bishop's Directives and encouragement:**

I want every congregation to know, if they have not heard already, that your Bishop's directives are clear: Congregations are **not to return to "in-person gatherings" at the 25% capacity** as currently allowed at this time. Just because it may be allowed, doesn't make it right, safe, smart, salutary or faithful to our call in Christ. In fact, it is not safe, and the infection rate of COVID-19 is still on the rise. We have not reached the CDC "benchmarks" for the phases of returning to in-building meetings yet. Our culture is trying to balance health issues, with economy, I know. But if we don't get the health piece right, the economy won't matter. As I write this, (and the number will have gone up when you receive this) 967 people have died from COVID-19 in Minnesota, and there are 22,947 confirmed cases. Infection rates are going up and not down. Christians do

not put other people at risk of dying no matter how much they may want to return to their buildings. We are in this for a long, long time. And Christ in us makes us capable to deal with it maturely. As baptized disciples of Jesus, we care for the neighbor – and Jesus defined the neighbor as anyone, no exceptions. In the past 8 weeks, I have heard how smart and faithful so many of you are in your congregations to keep everyone safe. Thank you and keep it up! Remember, we have never cancelled worship – it goes on each week beautifully in our Synod through technology, which has opened the door to new forms of evangelism! You are the church. The building is not. You are worshipping and evangelizing without a building, just as the early church did.

I have instructed all our Rostered Leaders, and congregational Council members to create a **"Smart Team"** made up of elected leaders and other intelligent science-respecting members in each congregation to meet, discuss, and come up with a plan of

re-entering their church buildings only when it is safe to do so – even at the 10 people or less number. This plan must then be posted so everyone in the congregation knows about it. Many of you have this Smart Team up and running. Good on you. I commend you. This is hard work, I know, and that’s why the Holy Spirit is with you. Our Northeastern Minnesota Website has numerous resources. [www.nemnsynod.org](http://www.nemnsynod.org) See especially, “Bishop Aitken’s Guidance going forward,” and work with the Documents listed there:

- 1- (ELCA) Considerations for Returning to in-person Worship: Being Church Together During the COVID-19 Pandemic
- 2-The Risks, Know them, Avoid them.
- 3-Guidelines: In person Church Gatherings
- 4-Returning to the Sanctuary: Worship Resources
- 5-Gov. Walz; Worship Guidance
- 6- Liability Questions regarding re-opening buildings.

At our last two Rostered Ministers and Lay Leaders Zoom meetings, we discussed how well online worship, video and Face-time-live worship has been so very enriching. We also discussed a variety of new ways of worship that included – where possible – parking lot services with clear rules of safety, sharing parking lots with other congregations and the work of thinking through when the time is right, a gradual, regulated in-person building use, using the CDC, Minnesota Health Department, and the words of our Presiding Bishop, Synod Bishops, and faithful ELCA recommendations. COVID-19 is a moving target; we must all do our best to be informed.

You are precious, sisters and brothers in Christ. I pray for you and care for you. I am glad to be your Bishop. Don’t let those who haven’t thought this through take charge. Be good and respectful of your Rostered Leaders. I know them. I stand with them. They took vows to serve and lead in your congregations. Listen to them. And remember, many of our Rostered Leaders are in that “vulnerable” age group or pre-existing medical issue group. That “vulnerable” sector definition is changing all the time with this pandemic. We in the Church must respect their decisions to not meet in person, even as time goes on. There are a myriad of creative ways they will lead and serve you. As we lead together during these difficult days, and in the many difficult days ahead, let us be “wise as serpents and harmless as doves” as our Lord said to his disciples.

In the seriousness, partnership and joy of our call in Christ,

✝ Bishop Thomas M. Aitken, Northeastern Minnesota Synod, ELCA

## **A Note on Trinitarian Theology**

Today, June 1, is Trinity Sunday . . . And we are going to talk about God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And to accomplish this, we are going to have ‘do theology’ together. So, hold on to your hats; this might get a little weird. Dr. Rolf Jacobson, who is a professor at Luther Seminary in St. Paul has written a little book about theology called ‘Crazy Talk.’ It’s fun to read.

In the introduction, Dr. Jacobson begins by asking of the reader . . . ‘Have you ever listened to two theologians talk?’ Before the reader can answer, he adds, ‘If so, we hope the damage wasn’t permanent. If not, thank God . . . Theology has become a game played by a small circle of people who have trouble making friends.’ But then he gets serious, ‘Theology is a conversation for the whole church . . . At its most basic level, theology is talk about God.’ I would add that we are not ‘saved’ or reconciled to God and to each other by our theology. Theology is only the way we talk about God; nothing more, nothing less. We are ‘made whole,’ or ‘saved’ if you will, by our relationship with God.

So let’s get serious and do some ‘God talk.’ **The first thing you need to know is that theology uses the language and categories of philosophy to make statements.** Theology relies heavily on images, metaphors, similes, and analogies. In short, we use ‘curved language.’ For example, if one says that ‘Jesus is the Good Shepherd,’ does that mean that Jesus actually has sheep and the related chores to do each night. **Obviously not,** but the image of Jesus as Shepherd is powerful because we understand how shepherds care for their sheep.

Jesus also used images to talk about God. We know that Jesus referred to God as ‘Father.’ I understand that image because I have a loving Father who cares deeply for me. Does that mean that God is male? . . . **Certainly not!** But nonetheless, this is a powerful image that we understand. Shortly before his final week in Jerusalem, Jesus uses another image for God. He talks about God as a ‘mother hen’ who would take the city’s people under her protective wing to shelter them from the storms that would soon break over them when the Romans besieged the city. Like I said, we can summarize this by saying that theology uses ‘curved language.’ It’s a way of talking that uses images to describe an otherwise indescribable reality.

**We can make a second statement about theology.** The meanings of words change over time . . . And people use the same word to mean different things. The historical problem with theology is that the words we use often have different meanings for different people at different times. That is why theological argument is oftentimes fruitless. Please remember that theological statements try to describe the indescribable. God does not readily allow God’s self to ‘be put under the microscope.’

Theology is an acknowledgment that we are trying to describe [or make sense] of the Biblical witness as well as our own experiences of God. Theology is simply the way we talk about this to each other. I believe that Trinitarian language is an attempt to articulate this relationship more fully.

***Gospel – Matthew 28.16-20 & John 14.6, 16.7-15***

**From St. Matthew:** <sup>16</sup>Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. <sup>17</sup>When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. <sup>18</sup>And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup>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, <sup>20</sup>and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’

**From St. John:** <sup>6</sup>Jesus said to his disciples, ‘I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me . . . <sup>15-7</sup> Nevertheless I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. <sup>8</sup>And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: <sup>9</sup>about sin, because they do not believe in me; <sup>10</sup>about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; <sup>11</sup>about judgment, because the ruler of this world has been condemned. <sup>12</sup>I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. <sup>13</sup>When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. <sup>14</sup>He will glorify me because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. <sup>15</sup>All that the Father has is mine. For this reason, I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.’

***“If that’s not love, what is?”***

**Let us pray.** Almighty God, you are the holy *Three-in-One*. We know you as *Creator* because you are source of all life; as *Redeemer* because you died for us; and as *Counselor* because you are with us today. Dearest Lord, on this Trinity Sunday, we ask that you would strengthen our faith so that we will not yield to the temptations of the evil one. Let us rest secure in your threefold presence, trusting that you are sufficient to sustain us against all that might come. Triune God, hear our prayer; and let those who worship you this day be one, even as you are one. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

**Brothers and sisters, grace to you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.**

One of my favorite musicals is ‘*Fiddler on the Roof*’. My wife Vicki and I have seen it several times done by community theaters. Zero Mostel played the role of Tevye on

both on Broadway and in the movie. In *'Fiddler on the Roof,'* Tevye and his family are Russian Jews who live in Ukraine. And since it is the nineteenth century, they live in fear of Czarist persecution. But for the moment, all their fear is forgotten and there is a joyous celebration going on in the village. Tevye and his wife, Golda, are celebrating the engagement of their daughter. Because she is older and strong-willed, they had all but given up hope for her marriage. After the celebration is over, Tevye and Golda talk about their life together.

*Looking at Golda, Tevye asks, 'Do you love me?' After a while, Golda replies, 'Tevye, you are a fool.' But Tevye speaks again, 'I know that I am a fool . . . but do you love me?' Golda smiles at him. 'Do I love you? I've washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house, given you children, and milked your cow. After twenty-five years, why talk about it now?'*

*But Tevye persists; 'Golda, do you love me?'*

*Finally, Golda answers, 'For twenty-five years I have lived with you, fought with you, and stayed with you . . . If that's not love, what is?'*

The question **'Do you love me?'** is a very real for us today; especially as we are separated from our loved ones and friends by Covid-19. I think this question is at the root of every human being's existence. A child who has been disciplined by a parent tearfully asks, **'Do you love me?'** A person who has lost his/her job because of the present economic distress fearfully asks loved ones **'Do you still love me?'** A couple whose youngest child has just left home ask each other, **'Do you love me?'** An elderly resident in a nursing home asks anyone who listens, **'Do you love me?'**

**Do you love me? . . .** A question that is very much part of our lives . . . A question hurled against the seemingly impersonal universe in which we live. **Do you love me?** I would like to suggest that this question moves beyond the scope of human relationships. It is a question that has dramatic theological implications for us. But the unfortunate reality for each of us is that love, as we know it, is not perfect. We know far too well that love can disappoint, and that it is not always eternal. Therefore, as we move into the realm of faith, we need to be reassured. From the innermost part of our being, we cry out to God, **'Do you love me?'** And for our peace of mind, we have to know the answer.

As Christians, we do have the assurance of Scripture. In his first letter, John writes, *' . . . we know the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love, abides in God, and God abides in him.'* In the Gospel of John, Jesus says to his disciples. **'AS THE FATHER HAS LOVED ME, SO I HAVE LOVED YOU; ABIDE IN MY LOVE.'** And again in the Gospel of John, **'FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY SON, THAT WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM SHOULD NOT PERISH, BUT HAVE ETERNAL LIFE.'** Our God is a God of love; there can be no other conclusion.

Yet despite these words of assurance, we still need help. Our need to be loved by God is so great that we are often blind to the many ways this love is made real in our lives. This morning, I would like to suggest a different framework in which to think about God's love. This framework is what we call the Trinity. The Trinity is God's way of saying, 'I love you' to each of us.

When we talk about the 'Doctrine of the Trinity,' we are talking about something not mentioned explicitly in the Scriptures. The word 'Trinity' simply does not appear in the Bible. Now please understand that this does not mean that the Doctrine of the Trinity is not biblical. **On the contrary!** The Doctrine of the Trinity is biblical because it is implicit in the Scriptures. By implicit, I mean that it is inferred. While the word is not used in the Bible, we find many so-called Trinitarian formulas. As an example, one could cite today's Gospel, St. Matthew's story of our Lord's ascension. Before Jesus left his disciples, he commissioned them to '**... GO AND MAKE DISCIPLES OF ALL NATIONS, BAPTIZING THEM IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND THE SON, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT ...**'

By invoking the Trinitarian formula when they baptized new believers, the first disciples were really saying that the word 'God' was not sufficient to describe their experience of the divine... an experience that had radically changed the way they thought both about God and about themselves. The word 'God' was simply too small. It was too small because God had revealed himself to them in three unique ways: as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit... a revelation that continues even today. So, after years of Spirit-inspired reflection on the Scripture, the Church is able to make four statements about the Trinity.

**First, the divine unity of God is so constituted to include three persons – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.** The Father is God above us, the Son is God with us, and the Spirit is God within us. Each person of the Trinity can be identified by the way God becomes involved in our lives. God is the Creator of all that was, all that is, and all that will be. God is the Redeemer who became part of this creation to die so that humankind might not be destroyed by its sin. God is the Sanctifier, the Spirit of the Living Christ, who calls human beings from their sin to a life of redemption. But even more important, beyond the grand language of theology, Christians experience the Trinity on a more personal level. We, who stand in awe of birth and the mystery of life, know God as Creator. We, who live with our own brokenness, know God as Redeemer. And we, who are called in baptism to be children of the Kingdom, know God as Spirit.

**Second, the persons of the Trinity are a unity.** We do not worship three separate gods, nor do we understand that God has evolved in three stages — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But rather, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are interrelated and interconnected expressions of the same being. God is the '**three-in-one.**' And as much as I would like to prove to you that '**three equals one,**' the seminary does not teach special mathematics to do so. This is not possible because the Trinity is a mystery beyond our comprehension. Nevertheless, it is only as the Trinity that we can speak about the true

God who arrived in Jesus Christ for the redemption of the world. Our knowledge of the Trinity is bound to our confession of Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Jesus declares, **'WHAT IS THE FATHER'S BELONGS TO ME, AND WHAT IS MINE, THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH WILL GIVE TO YOU. I AM THE TRUTH.'** These words are the heartbeat of our Trinitarian faith.

**Third, the Trinity helps us to understand the true meaning of brotherly and sisterly love.** The unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is symbolic of the unity possible for those who call themselves 'Christian.' Our individuality is no excuse for separateness; but instead, it is a strengthening virtue as we serve in the Kingdom together.

**And finally, the Trinity is a gift of love.** Our experience of the Triune God hinges upon one point alone . . . a lonely cross outside of Jerusalem. It is on this cross that God became one with creation. In sharing our death, God's divine love for us was forever put beyond doubt.

But still, like Tevye, I need reassurance. In my deepest moments of despair, I ask, **'Father, do you love me?'** And, at that moment, the Holy Spirit gives me sight of Jesus' cross . . . **'And if that's not love, what is?'** Amen.