

Creation in Community: Order Over Chaos

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Caldwell Presbyterian Church

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Texts: Genesis 1:1-2, 4a; Matthew 28:16-20; 2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Last Thursday night, I sat down to watch Game One of the NBA Finals. I confess to being a Steph Currie fan. I watched him play once in high school along with his dad, Dell, back in the 1980s with the original Charlotte Hornets.

As with the entire series, Steph and his team ran off with the game and, as my family knows I am prone to do, I got bored and found something else to watch - the Scripps National Spelling Bee, which proved to be far more competitive than the basketball game.

As judges called out hundreds of words, remarkable young men and women, girls and boys, really, divined the spelling of multi-syllabic words I'd never heard, much less used. Words like, *sceloporus*, *wayzgoose*, *gifblaar*, *latifundium* and *phthiropagous*.

One by one, these brilliant kids dropped out, which was a pity in and of itself. Then two were left. In the 36th round, after hours of intense concentration, a scrappy but composed 6th grader named Ananya Vinay outlasted them all to win a \$40,000 cash prize among other things.

Ananya caught my eye many rounds earlier when she spelled the only word I even recognized, *wabohu*. As Ananya knew, it comes from Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament. It is part of a two-word phrase we find in Biblical Hebrew – *tohu wabohu* – which means formless and void.

Formless and void. Shapeless. Chaos. Order-less. An unruly mess.

As we heard in this morning's reading in Genesis, that is how the ancient Hebrews imagined the Earth at creation. That is, before a wind, a feminine wind I might add, swept over it and whipped it into shape.

With all of the disorder, disunion and discord of our days, *tohu wabohu* may seem to some of us an apt description of our world and nation. *Tohu wabohu* also crops up in our personal lives, in our relationships, in our health, in our spirit, in our careers, in our families, maybe even in our life with God. *Tohu wabohu*.

But friends, hear the good news. The testimony of scripture is that we worship – that we belong to – a God whose first priority is order. Not our order, necessarily, but God's order.

Today, on Trinity Sunday, that can refuel us as we head back out as God's people into the often-seeming out-of-control world beyond these doors. In the last two weeks, we've

celebrated Christ's ascension into heaven and the arrival of the Holy Spirit, the advocate Jesus promised us in his bodily absence.

With the Trinity, as I say ever year, we find ourselves fully equipped. The fullness of God has come and is dancing around us as three persons at once, equipping us with what we need to navigate an often confusing and dispiriting world.

All that said, the Trinity can be one of our hardest doctrines to grasp. How can God be three and one, all at once? Just exactly how does that work?

Whether as a child or an adult, we ask that out of our human existence and perspective. We grasp and grope for a mystery whose concrete proof is out of reach. After all, the church spent its first 400 years arguing and subdividing over the Trinity.

But if we can relax our insistence on earthly logic, if we can submit ourselves to a little divine wisdom, the Holy Trinity tells us much about God and God's design for creation and community.

First of all, the Trinity shows us that God is by nature relational. Within God are three expressions, three ways God reveals herself to us. However we wish to express it, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Mother, Child and Spirit, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer ... these three aspects are inseparable. We must know all three to know God fully.

The importance of this design then reflects out into the world. These relationships within God inform our own relationships each other. They are not to be surface, simple, shallow interactions but deep and open, unreserved, available and even vulnerable.

The second fundamental truth of the Trinity is that it shows us God's heart for fairness and justice. Each element of God's self-expression is equal. One does not spring from another in a hierarchical sequence. They stand, if you will, shoulder to shoulder, equal and equitable. One does not have privilege or power over the other.

Thus, where inequality or inequity exist in the world, we know something is amiss. Where unearned privilege is used to oppress others, we know God's design, God's order, has been cast aside in lieu of how the world and its powers can twist things against God's will.

Third, scripture tells us that the three parts of the Trinity are interdependent. They do not and cannot exist without each other. They depend on each other and our full understanding of God depends on all three. God did not fully express herself – at least for our understanding – until we knew her in three persons.

The three scriptures we attend to today testify to all of that.

Each of today's passages bears witness to God's order and Trinitarian design. But, they also seem to work together. These passages are, as a group, Trinitarian.

In the opening lines of Genesis, the very first lines of scripture, we meet the Godhead. But we also see God's triune nature in the beginning. We encounter God the Creator, who created the heavens and the earth. We experience God in the Spirit when the wind sweeps over the face of the waters to bring order. And we anticipate the light of the world, Jesus Christ, when God declares that the "light was good." From the beginning, God's priority is order and it is triune.

In the Matthew passage, we hear most prominently God in Christ and how Christ expresses yet another aspect of divine order. This passage is, of course, known as the Great Commission, the moment before he ascends in which the risen Christ sends his disciples out into the world.

"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," Jesus says. "Go therefore and make disciples of *all* the nations."

Doesn't this use of all show God's expansive idea of order? Don't we hear how the true created order is not to be limited to a few but to be extended to all?

The Great Commission also shows us that God's order depends on God's people going out, not staying in. That is the opposite of what many might think order is, isn't it? Some might think it is easier to keep things in order by playing it safe. Order is best kept when we tend to our own, when we tribe up, when we speak to and listen to people just like us.

But in this passage from Matthew, Christ sends his disciples out into a dangerous and messy world ... and he does so with a Trinitarian blessing. Go and baptize all, Jesus says, and do so in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Yes, God's divine order, as advanced and expressed in Christ, is outward facing, oriented to the messy and sometimes harsh and hurtful world, full of all kinds of people, cultures and circumstances. For that is where ministry is done, rather than just among those that look and think and act like us.

As we know at Caldwell, that calling is often messy, but it is gloriously messy, a kind of order that is courageous enough to bear witness to God's love and justice and mercy without knowing where it will take us, just as the disciples did not know where Christ's Trinitarian commission would send them.

Our trinity of scriptures today is completed with the passage from 1 Corinthians. The Apostle Paul, the author of this letter, knew something about following God's calling without always worrying about where it took him. He traveled 10,000 miles over eleven years, finding ways to tell of God's grace in Jesus Christ across cultures and peoples and religions.

This passage comes from a church in bitter conflict. But Paul's prescription in his parting words to those quarreling people pointed them back to the God we met in Genesis, a God of order in relationship.

"Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live peace and the God of love and peace will be with you."

Did you hear that? "Put things in order," Paul says. Put things in order, Paul says, because God made us to be in relationship, just as the three persons in God are in relationship. God's self-expression is God's design for the world. Not radical individualism. Not divided and separate and unequal. Not I have mine and you get yours. Not even a world where we let ourselves off with the shallow statement, "Let's just agree to disagree."

Just as God brought order to a world and universe out of *tohu wabohu*, aren't we to struggle with the elements of tribalism, segregation, classicism, sexism, racism, homophobia and even political extremism? Aren't we to do the hard work of reconciliation until we have a world where we can see each other eye to eye, a world where all have enough and a world where the privilege of a few is stamped out flat so that all may stand and work together shoulder to shoulder with mutual respect?

Isn't that God's order?

To be clear, I am not talking about order for the sake of order, for that is only artificial and ungodly. We know how much harm has done to countless peoples in the name of order as ideology. We know what has been done in the name of colonialism and unchecked capitalism. These false ideologies bring order only to the powerful and the few.

These collective and social sins subvert and oppress and marginalize. They impose false notions of hierarchy, such as the social and purely un-divine construct of race. And they defy what we know about God from the Holy Trinity, that unity is not to be defined partially but collectively, not as "either/or" but by "both/and" and, as Christ said in the Great Commission, all.

Again, we are reminded of that most radical but most compelling statement made by the great bridge builder, the Apostle Paul, in his letter to the church at Galatia, when he wrote:

"As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

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Isn't that the promise of the relational God who called us into covenantal relationship with each other, relationships with each other as with the three persons of the Trinity, relationships of interdependence and mutual respect, of love and justice for all.

When Abraham Lincoln returned the battlefield at Gettysburg to commemorate the dead in our nation's civil war, he spoke of America as nation that is to be ordered "of the people, by the people, for the people?"

But long before those words at Gettysburg, Bible translator John Wycliffe wrote them in 1384 in the prologue to one of his translations, that "the Bible is for the government of the people, by the people and for the people."

There again, a Trinitarian order that flows from God's own Holy Trinity – God's self expression, God's manifestation in three persons for creation not to be torn asunder by deep divisions among peoples – but creation that is to be ordered of community, by community and for community.

May God show us the way.

Amen