

The Holy Trinity and Love: the Needful Thing for a Country in Turmoil

Gen. 1:1–2:4a; Matt. 28:16-20

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Holy Trinity A

Pastor Douglas Punke

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

Around the country, what will the churches be preaching on this Sunday? I'm quite sure that, like me, many will be addressing the turmoil that has gripped our nation. Following the example of the George Floyd memorial service, many will likely be filled with calls for justice and with political commentary and emotional rhetoric, but will be lacking in the one thing needful. The memorial service in Minneapolis began with a pastor, who said that he was representing not only the pastors and preachers of Minneapolis and St. Paul, but also the Bloods on the south side and the Gangsta Disciples and Vice Lords on the north side. These are names of gangs. He read the Scriptures, he said, as a representative of criminal gangs. I don't get that.

The Rev. Al Sharpton preached the homily. His pretext was Ecclesiastes 3: *"For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven,"* but he rarely even pretended to preach on it. His themes were many: "take your knees off our neck," "we are asking for justice," etc. Hope of heaven and faith were mentioned, but not the name of Jesus. I would say to the Reverend, there is indeed a time for every matter under heaven, and he did not deliver it, for a Christian memorial service is time to give comfort in Christ.

On the other hand, I would assert that, at another time or another occasion, a call for justice in our country is righteous. It's godly. I'm not talking rioting and mob violence, looting and destruction, but justice. God is just, and calls for justice from His people: *"He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"* says the prophet Micah (6:8). Most of the country would agree, even if they might not agree on policy prescriptions, especially with regard to what happened to Mr. Floyd. I admit I haven't spoken to everyone, but I have not heard one person defend what that Minneapolis police officer did to him. Quite the contrary, I have heard universal condemnation of him and the other officers that stood by and watched the life be drained from Mr. Floyd. *"You shall not murder,"* God says (Ex. 20:13); and again, *"From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man"* (Gen. 9:5).

It does not go without saying that these officers killed this man unjustly, for to "go without saying" often means that it is never said. "White Silence is Racism," said a sign of one Fort Wayne protestor the other day. "White Silence is Violence," said another. I liked the rhyme of the last one—white silence is violence. I don't believe either of those sentiments is necessarily so, but I don't mind those protestors expressing them. No, I say to you today, not because I am goaded or

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shamed into it, but because it is right, that this evil act needs to be punished. These officers murdered George Floyd, and although God gives the sword to the government to punish evildoers, a just government should exercise that awesome power with justice. And this act was not just. Therefore, the government should exercise the sword against these murderers.

As a Christian, if you're feeling a bit outraged over this incident, that's okay ... I would even say, that's good. Of course, God puts no boundaries on the justice He calls for, but Christians are especially concerned about fellow Christians, fellow members of Christ's body — not Gangsta Disciples, but disciples who have been incorporated into Christ's body by Holy Baptism, who bear the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

I understand that George Floyd was such a person. Oh, yes, I understand that he had done some criminal acts down in Houston, and he was suspected of passing a counterfeit \$20 bill. He was a sinner. *“Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone”* (John 8:7). But just like us, he was a sinner who had been redeemed by the blood of Christ, and that blood cleanses from sins (1 John 1:7). God *“is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:9).

Now, our Evangelical friends like to talk about having a personal relationship with Jesus. We Lutherans don't really use that language. To me, it sounds too much like we have some sort of romantic relationship with Jesus. I can't go there. There is, of course, Biblical language of the relationship of Christ with the church, sometimes using bridegroom–bride language, sometimes using head–body language.

So, as Christians in the church, there is a relationship with Jesus. But, there is also the relationship one with another as part of Christ's body. Again, St. Paul says it happens by baptism, that you are made part of Christ's body — members, all distinct, but one body, with the result, St. Paul says, that *“members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together”* (1 Cor. 12:25-26). We may have different politics, but surely we can have compassion upon — we can suffer together with —the George Floyd family and all who suffer injustice around our country.

Relationship language is appropriate as we talk about the mystery of the Holy Trinity, too, on this Festival day. There is God's relationship with us, creating and preserving us as we heard in the Old Testament lesson, redeeming and saving us through the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ as we heard Peter preach today in his Pentecost Day sermon, converting and sanctifying us by baptism and teaching as Jesus said. And in these works, there is no distinction to be made with regard to

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the persons of the Trinity. We maintain the Unity of the Godhead in these external acts: “one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance.” With regard to the Triune God’s external works, we say with the teachers of old, that they are undivided. All three persons of this one God are at work in the world and in us doing these things.

Yet, we also maintain and confess that, within this Godhead, there are three distinct persons, even as we heard Jesus name them in His commission to the Church. That’s the most explicit reference to Holy Trinity in the Scriptures. God is Father and Son and Holy Spirit, all three equally “God and Lord,” and “yet there are not three Gods” or “three Lords” “but one God” and “one Lord”—“one Eternal,” “one Uncreated and one Infinite,” “one Almighty.”

Therefore, external works do not distinguish the persons of the Holy Trinity. We do not distinguish the three persons by calling them “Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.” The work of creation does not distinguish the three persons: “*In the beginning, God created*”—that’s the Father, “*the Spirit of God was hovering*”—that’s the Spirit (Gen. 1:1-2), “*In the beginning was the Word ... All things were made through him*”—that’s the Son (John 1:1, 3). The work of conversion does not distinguish the three persons: Jesus says, “*I ... will draw all people to myself*” (John 12:32); He says of the Father, “*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him*” (John 6:44); and of the Spirit, He says, “*he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment*” (John 16:8).

No, the distinction comes in the mysterious internal works of the Godhead, as these are confessed in the Athanasian Creed. “The Father is not made nor created nor begotten by anyone. The Son is neither made nor created, but begotten of the Father alone. The Holy Spirit is of the Father and of the Son, neither made nor created nor begotten, but proceeding.” Said a bit differently, the Father is the fountainhead of the Holy Trinity; the Son is the begotten one; the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. This is their internal relationship, and this is how Scripture distinguishes them.

Whether you like this or not, St. Augustine put forth a distinction of the three persons in terms of love — remember, John says, “*God is love*” (1 John 4:8). In love, Augustine finds “a Trace of the Trinity,” for in love, he says, there “are three things: he that loves, and that which is loved, and love” (Augustine, *Of the Trinity*, VIII:10). Do you hear the trace?—the Father as He who loves, the Son as the Beloved, and the Holy Spirit as love itself. Interesting how Augustine tries to put these two Scriptural truths together: God is Trinity and God is Love.

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This formulation has its critics, to be sure, but it seems appropriate on this Festival of the Holy Trinity as our country is so roiled in conflict and protest, anger and hurt, to remind us that this is who our God is. Therefore, I want to conclude simply with these words of Scripture regarding this Trinity and us who bear His name: *“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us”* (1 John 4:7-12). God grant it to us and to our country

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In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.