

HOLY TRINITY

June 7, 2020

I haven't preached a normal sermon on Trinity Sunday in a long time.

This isn't going to be a normal Trinity sermon either: Probably never more than now has the idea of trying to explain to you the theological rationale for an immanent and transcendent Trinity seemed less appealing. Rarely has it seemed more advisable to throw out the texts assigned for the day and offer you a word about the world's events.

I am not a fast thinker, or at least not the kind of processor that can turn on a dime and offer up something thoughtful and relevant to the latest headline. I'm not well adapted to the 24/7 news cycle and the demands of social media that one ought to be posting one's thoughts all the time.

I want to talk to you this morning about 400 years.

I am somewhat comforted by the fact that what we know as the doctrine of the Trinity took about 400 years to come to be. From the moment Jesus left the earth, people began arguing about how he could be both human and divine; about how the God of Abraham was also calling all nations to himself through Jesus; about how the Holy Spirit coming up through the church could also be one with the creator and the redeemer. It is said that in Augustine's time you could not walk into the local baker's shop without someone offering an opinion about the nature of the Trinity. The disagreements sometimes became violent and bishop's experienced death threats over matters of the nature of Christ.

And the creeds, the Chalcedonian formula and the Nicene creed what we think of as the answers to the great mystery of the Trinity, the result of all those debates – that did not get resolved for many many generations. 400 years, really, before the church agreed on the creeds we now say every week as if they are obvious. 400 years before church leaders agreed that we could say Jesus was fully human and fully divine completely and at the same time.

And it's not as if the creed really resolved any of these tensions forever. There are plenty of people who question whether these creeds 400 years in the making were the right one. Even more people wonder whether they even answer the right questions. For those of you who have a hard time reciting the creed and feel like the church is beating a dead horse, I sympathize. Believe me anyone who has

a decent seminary education has probably found that the more you know, the harder it is to say anything with certainty. But when a few paragraphs take 400 years to make, I'm reluctant to say that our few decades of wisdom are greater than all the centuries that came before.

If there's a lesson from this messy process it is that collectively, human beings are not fast learners. We like to make sense of things, but the greatest mysteries of the faith are not solved in short order. I think the greatest argument against the creeds is not any particular error in their statements but the impression they give that we have resolved all the mysteries. When in fact they very appropriately should draw us even further into asking "how can this be?"

Sometimes, the question is worth more than the answer.

—

Which brings me to another 400 years. The 400 years marked last year in 2019, -- 400 years since the first African slaves were forcibly brought across the Atlantic. The pain we see across our country is one more moment in learning about the injustice that has infected our country from its beginnings. It has been said that along with our treatment of native peoples, slavery is America's original sin.

And even that 400 years was preceded by years of colonial actions and volumes of Western thought that perpetually imagined people of color as less than human. For centuries people who read the same creation story we do heard it said that God created humankind in God's image, and yet refused to see God's image in vast swaths of humanity.

America's original sin was not healed by the Civil War. It was not erased by the emancipation proclamation. All was not made well the minute we stopped saying that a slave only counts as 3/5 of a person. It was not erased by the civil rights movement.

Minnesota is not immune from systemic racism because we are in the north. Our white privilege was not atoned for by the famous stance of the Minnesota First at Gettysburg. Minnesota has one of the worst records of economic and educational inequity for people of color. And now we are sadly a symbol across the country of what happens when a whole swath of society is deliberately held down.

There have been a wash of words and commentary and images this week. As there were after the deaths of Eric Garner, and Trayvon Martin, and Philando Castile, and so many more. One reporter said this has become what news people call an evergreen story – a story which keeps getting told over and over and over. But what has struck me this week more than anything was the silence.

The slogan silence is violence has been repeated a lot this week to remind those of us who are white that when we say nothing about injustice, we perpetuate it.

But silence also has its place amidst speech. Silence can convict us, but it can also make us face the reality of where we are.

There were the moments of silence observed across the country to remember the fact that George Floyd was held down for 8 minutes and 46 seconds as his breath was pressed out of him. And the brief silences observed for many people of color who have died in police custody, including Breonna Taylor, who would have been 27 on Friday.

I was struck by the long silent pauses Minneapolis 'Mayor Jacob Frey had in his interview with the New York Times, as he wrestled with expressing his sorrow and regret that brutality in Minneapolis was the spark for nationwide unrest.

The astonishing 21 seconds of silence that Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau clocked when asked to say something about the week's events in the United States. 21 seconds of saying absolutely nothing before finally speaking a few halting words about his own country's struggles with race and first nations.

We don't usually want our leaders to be silent. In fact we usually demand a quick and articulate response to just about everything that happens. We fault our leaders when they say nothing and then we fault them again when it seems they have not said what we wanted.

But for those of us who are white, this moment does not only demand that we raise our voices in solidarity. It demands that we fall silent and acknowledge that we are slow learners. We do not understand. We do not understand what it is like to be a person of color in America. We do not understand what it is like to have our skin make us automatically suspect. We do not understand what it is like to be afraid of law enforcement even though you have never broken a law yourself. We do not understand profoundly enough that our proud history is tainted all the

way through and all the way down by systemic racism and slave trade that began 400 years ago.

Brothers and sisters you who share white skin with me: if we feel like we need to quickly resolve that pain and trauma with saying the right thing; or that we need to make the people around us more comfortable by giving a pat on the back to white people of good will; or we need to minimize racism by naming all the other kinds of pain people face that don't have anything to do with their skin color; then we had better be silent a little bit longer. If we think the anger should all go away because a few halting steps toward justice have been made, we had better listen a lot harder to what it is like to be a person of color in this country.

And yes it will be uncomfortable; we might have to face fears that are irrational and fears that make perfect sense. We might learn some very uncomfortable things about ourselves and face some very sad truths about how we were raised. But being uncomfortable is the very least we can do for our fellow children of God.

*God formed the human being, the earthling in God's image*

*In the image of God the human was created.*

*Male and female God created them.*

This seems like the least complicated thing about Christian doctrine. And yet we find it the hardest to live out. We need to ask ourselves why and keep asking until something changes.

God does a lot of speaking in Genesis 1, but after humankind is created God pauses. God says it is good. It is very good, and then, it seems, God is silent for a while. As if letting that sink in.

I can think of no better sabbath practice on this day than for us to be silent, to remember beloved black children of God.

