

We are made in the Image of Right Relationship
A Sermon for St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church, Saint Paul, MN
Sunday, June 16, 2019 – Trinity Sunday

In the name of the Holy Trinity: Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Growing up in Harare, like most students who attend Jesuit schools, my youth was defined by a threefold curriculum: Academics, Arts, and Sports. I was average in Academics, fabulous in the Arts, but when it came to Sports, I was abominable! I came last in cross country; at soccer I was relegated from defender, to linesman, to the bench; I did my Latin homework behind the practice wall during tennis; and the only reason why I escaped the wrath of Mr. Turner, our ruthless sports master, was his love of my meticulous penmanship and fastidious attention to detail made me his only choice for the First Cricket Team's Scorekeeper! I am glad that I can reminisce about my struggles with sports with humor now, but at that time those were some of the most difficult days of my life.

I was kicked, insulted, and ridiculed by my peers. I was so ashamed that no matter how hard I tried to improve in fitness, agility, coordination, and strength, I simply could not succeed. While the suffering I experienced as a youth can never be compared with the horrors that early Christians suffered in Rome, Paul's Epistle to the Romans is a timeless message my adolescent self and every person gathered in Church today still desperately needs to hear. We need to hear these pastoral words because each of us knows what it feels like to endure suffering. Paul writes,

we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us (Romans 5:4-5).

When I was about 13, on a particularly difficult day, as I tried to ignore the kicks, insults, and jokes, and plod on to finish the cross-country course, our house prefect Greg Biegel, jogged beside me. Even though he would have only been 18 years old at the time, he embodied the pastoral message in Paul's Epistle. Mr. Biegel, as we addressed our prefects then, saw my suffering, jogged beside me and offered words of encouragement. Suddenly none of the indignities mattered – the kicks, insults, and mocking laughter; the embarrassment of delaying a senior prefect who should have finished with cross country ages ago to get on with studying for his A-level exams; and the shame of being teased by my much faster peers watching me finish last yet again – none of that mattered. None of those painful humiliations mattered because I was not alone. Thanks to Mr. Biegel, my house prefect, another person was right beside me, was a witness to my dignity, and made me feel like a person.

Today is Trinity Sunday and we remember that we are made in the image of the Triune God. We are made in the image of eternal, dynamic, loving, creative, selfless, consubstantial, co-existent Relationship. Right Relationship that creates, redeems, and sustains all that is, seen and unseen. We cannot use reason or logic to comprehend the Holy Trinity; we can only know the Triune God by being in Right

Relationship with God in ourselves, with God in our neighbors, and with God in all of Creation. In today's Gospel Jesus says to his disciples **“I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth”** (John 16:12-13). The Spirit of Truth is illogical, inexplicable, and irrational; and yet the Spirit of Truth is a palpable and undeniably real experience of being in Right Relationship.

As a Zimbabwean the closest I come to understanding the mystery of being created in the image of the Holy Trinity is the ethical philosophy known in Shona as “hunhu” or its Zulu equivalent “ubuntu.” For Bantu peoples in Southern Africa this philosophy of ethical personhood teaches that “a person is a person through other persons.”¹ Our shared humanity is based on the recognition of and reverence for our unique, sacred differences. Hunhu or Ubuntu occurs when what it means to be a human is not embedded in my person solely as an individual but when our personhood is co-created by belonging to each other. I am because you are, and since you are, I am, too. This “I am” is not a rigid, selfish subject, but a dynamic, selfless relationality.

¹ Michael Onyebuchi Eze, *Intellectual History in Contemporary South Africa* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 190-91.

Anglican Priest and Elizabethan Theologian, Richard Hooker understood the theological significance of *hunhu* or *ubuntu* within his own cultural context of Renaissance England when he wrote,

God hath created nothing simply for itself, but each thing in all things, and of every thing each part in other have such interest, that in the whole world nothing is found whereunto any thing created can say, 'I need thee not.'²

We need each other because we are created by, with, and in the relational essence and substance of the Triune God. On this first Sunday after Pentecost – Trinity Sunday – The Apostle Paul’s Epistle to the Romans reminds us that **“God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”** This inexplicable, illogical, irrational Spirit of Truth is experienced when we are present to one another’s suffering; when we encourage one another through the sufferings we endure together; when we bear witness to the character of resilience we co-create in sharing our struggles; and when genuine hope, steeped in the hard work and practice of mutual love, binds our sacred diversity in Holy Unity.

As we celebrate Holy Eucharist today, we give thanks to God that each of us is made in the image of God: Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit, Who was, and is, and ever shall be the Loving Relationship we are created to share. Amen.

² Richard Hooker, *The Works of Mr. Richard Hooker: With an Account of His Life and Death*, Volume 1 (Palala Press, 2015), 362.