

Community Building

Early this week as I was driving through the city, I saw this on the back of a pick-up truck near Pimlico. (Insert Picture). Does anyone know where that eagle comes from? What it stands for? It is, in fact, the Nazi eagle, most often seen clutching a swastika in its talons. I could not believe my eyes – so much so that I actually had to take a picture of it once we were stopped at the red light.

Now I *know* that white supremacy is on the rise in our country right now – or is, at least, more openly expressed and proclaimed – but I guess I didn't expect to see a Nazi symbol so proudly displayed on a car in the middle of Baltimore city. And seeing it really shook me. My mind immediately went to the horrific – did this man have a gun? Was he going to shoot someone or someones? What was he doing in this incredibly non-white part of the city – was he here for nefarious reasons? And I keenly felt that the safety of my family was threatened – white supremacists are not known for their tolerance of the LGBTQ community. This man was *so close* to where I live. I haven't stopped thinking about it all week.

And that's been particularly interesting *this* week, leading up to *this* Sunday. Yes, it's Father's Day – and that's what we usually celebrate as a congregation at this point in June. But it's also Trinity Sunday, the day in our church year when we reflect on what it means to have a God who is three-in-one. And *this* year, with all that has been going on in our nation and our world, with our volunteers here getting ready to help us with our first week of camp, and having just seen a man proudly displaying a Nazi symbol on a truck, *this* year I think it's important to talk about why the trinity matters.

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.' So John begins his gospel, proclaiming his belief that Christ – the Word of God – not only *is* God but has existed as God from the very start of everything. John uses the 'in the beginning' format because he also wants to evoke for us the intro to Genesis 1 – 'In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void, and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.' If you recall, in Hebrew the word for 'wind' is the same as the word for 'spirit' – *ruach*. Thus Genesis 1 implies that the Spirit of God was *also* present from the very beginning. And so – in the beginning – there was God and the Word and the Spirit, three-in-one.

And you might be thinking, *so what?* Why does that matter? Why are Christians *so* adamant about the whole trinity thing? Like, really, what's at stake?

Sure, I get that. I've *thought* that myself. But this is one of those doctrines that I've come to love for what it says about God and how God longs for us to exist as creatures made in the divine image. Because what this doctrine tells us is that our God lives in eternal community – community is not something that God creates outside of Godself, by pulling us creatures into relationship with the divine, but rather community is something that existed *within* God long before creation ever was. The persons of the trinity, whom we call Parent and Word and Spirit, lived together as perfect community from the very beginning, each freely giving and receiving, one from the other, in love.

So when we proclaim that we have a trinitarian God, we're proclaiming that community is a core characteristic of the divine. It is endemic to the nature of the Lord whom we follow. And so when we say that we are made in the image of God, we're saying that we were made to be in community. We reveal the image of God within us when build communities.

But. But there's a little more to it, right? Because there are many different types of communities that we can create, and I don't think that they all reflect the divine. For example,

that guy in that truck almost certainly belongs to a community of white supremacists. Is that really the kind of group that reflects the image of God within? I don't think so. But what are we missing?

Well, there's this really important part of the nature of the trinity that we sometimes overlook. Yes, it's eternal community, but if that community were *enough* for God, then we wouldn't exist. There would be no creation. And there didn't have to be, right? I mean, God had a family of love right there in the trinity – boom. Done. So why make the universe? Why make all of us and all of the rest of whatever and whoever exists in space?

This, to me, points to the heart of the community of the trinity. It's *not* an insular community that is content within itself. It *is* a community that shares *so much love* that it overflows the boundaries of the trinity in order to make the family bigger and bigger, making all of creation and pulling it into a nurturing embrace. Divine community is a healthy, vibrant community of mutual love that is free from fear and thus can turn outward. And *we are made in that image*. That's what's at stake in this doctrine of the trinity.

But what does any of that have to do with white-supremacist-pick-up-truck-dude?

Not that long ago, McKenna reminded me of something that we talk about in the International Relations world. We were talking about the books of Nehemiah and Ezra, which are two accounts of the same time period in Israelite history. In this time, the Israelites are beginning to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and return to it after having been in Babylonian exile. At the end of these texts – and we read part of the end of Ezra this morning – the leaders, in the name of God, condemn the practice of marrying foreign wives and having children with them, and they make the people cast out those women and children. Basically, they build a community that turns inward and shuns the outsider. McKenna pointed out that this is not uncommon in the aftermath of trauma. Communities that experience tragedy (like having your nation destroyed and being deported) often circle the wagons to regroup, turning inward. This is something that scholars note in nations that have experienced trauma. In Northern Ireland, for example, there are still incredibly inward-turning groups of loyalists (those who support connection with the UK) and Republicans (those who support joining the Republic of Ireland), which persist because of their experience of the Troubles.

In the United States, we first had 9/11. It was a *huge* trauma for the entire nation – so much so that International Relations scholars talk about the pre- and post-9/11 world as two separate things. Then we entered into the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which was followed by the Great Recession. And in response, we see these inward-facing communities of fear that have grown in strength, giving rise to people like white-supremacist-pick-up-truck-dude. This guy, and people like him across the country and throughout the world, are choosing to build communities that are defined by hatred and anger, which grow out of the seeds of deep, deep fear. This guy, and people like him, are choosing to build communities that actively perpetuate hurt and harm. This guy, and people like him, are choosing to build communities that are the antithesis of the community of the trinity. As the people of God, we are called to build differently.

We are called, as the people of God, to build communities that are so filled with love that it spills out and pulls new people in. We are called, as the people of God, to build communities that stand up to fear with hope and faith. We are called, as the people of God, to build communities where life and love can flourish, blossom, and spread the seeds of new life and love out in the world. We are called to build communities that reflect the image of our triune God.

For all of us hosting camp this week, that means that we're called to develop deep relationships with the kids that we're serving, allowing them to challenge us and shape us even as we respect, encourage, and love them as Christ does. There are going to be times when that's really hard. But some of us know from experience just how profound a call it is and just how life giving it can be for us all.

For everyone else as you go about your lives this week, consider how your actions in the world build community and ask what kind of community you're building. Where does the love of God overflow you and flood out into the world? Where does fear constrain you? How do the communities that you're a part of already reflect (or not reflect) our triune God's image?

And for all of us – let us remember that we are, indeed, created in the divine image. Let us remember that we have the capacity to build communities that are nothing short of world-transforming. And let us remember that we have that capacity because we are already part of the community of God, held in a love that is so great it could not help but create all that there is, was, and will be. Thanks be to God.