



A Sermon for Trinity Sunday



By The Rev. Rachel Cornwell

June 16, 2019

Trinity Sunday

Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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If you have ever been through something difficult in your life (which I would guess is all of us at one time or another), you have probably had the experience of some well-meaning person saying something to you that they intend as supportive, but really isn't. Perhaps it was in the wake of a serious medical diagnosis, when a friend tried to show empathy by telling you about their own very painful ingrown toenail. Or when a loved one died, and your co-worker wanted to tell you about how they were still so broken up over the death of their cat. Maybe it was a neighbor who is a person of faith and they had some handy platitude that they hoped would be encouraging. "Everything happens for a reason..." or "God never gives you more than you can handle!" Things that are not only untrue, they are also really unhelpful.

If this has ever happened to you, I want to turn you on to an artist, Emily McDowell, who makes what she calls "empathy cards" for people going through challenging times. As opposed to a sympathy card, which expresses feelings of pity and sorry for someone else's misfortune, empathy gets down in the hurt with that person, offering understanding and trying to share in the pain of whatever it is they are going through. Emily McDowell's empathy cards offer encouragement in the form of truths that respect the reality of how hard the situation is; and a bit of humor that has just the right touch of snark.

One card reads:

"There really is no good card for this"

Another:

"One chemo down! Let's celebrate with whatever doesn't taste disgusting"

"There's no normal to go back to, but I'm here to help you build a new one (and I'll bring snacks)"

"I wish I could take away your pain. Or at least take away the people who compare it to the time their hamster died."

I love these cards because there are times when sympathy is not enough; when the words we want to offer feel hollow or insufficient. When in our desire to alleviate the pain of another person, we threaten to add to it, because whatever we want to say, they cannot bear it right now. Sometimes a grieving, hurting person just needs to know that we are there for them, not with some words that will make it all better (there are none) but offering to be there with them.

On the night when Jesus gathered with his disciples for a last supper with them, after washing their feet and breaking bread, pouring wine to share his body and blood, but before he is arrested and crucified, the gospel of John gives us three chapters of Jesus' final words to his friends. He knows that only has these few hours before his death to convey to them everything he wants them to know, needs them to learn, hopes they will remember. But then he says to them: "There is so much I need to tell you, but you can't bear it now."

There is so much more that he wants to say to them, but he knows, they can't take it. They are scared and confused, sad and anxious. I was struck when I re-read Jesus' farewell speech again, starting at this verse, by Jesus' empathy for his disciples.

He is the one who is preparing to die, and yet, he understands how their fear, their grief, is impacting them. He knows that they won't be able to take all of his words in, so he promises them something else.

Jesus tells his followers that while he is going away and they will no longer see him, the Father will send “an advocate” in his place, to abide with them, to guide them to truth, to reveal to them all that they do not already understand. This is the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, the presence of the living God that abides with us, leads and guides us, inspires and empowers us.

Jesus explains that because they cannot bear all that he needs them to hear, the Spirit will come to the disciples to lead them to truth; to reveal to them things that they cannot understand now, that they cannot bear to hear in this moment. This third person of the Trinity will help them, will help us, to continue to grow in faith, give us peace that passes all understanding and help us to move through this present suffering into a future with hope. And this is what the disciples need as they face his death, not more words, but the promise of someone who will walk with them and lead them forward in faith.

Now usually in the Bible, we find the Holy Spirit showing up at key moments, when something big is happening, something is in transition or something new is being birthed — the ruach or breath of God breathing life into creation; the Spirit coming upon Mary to bring God into the world in the life of Jesus; or opening the heavens and coming down to earth in the form of a dove as Jesus is baptized in the river Jordan.

Or just last week we celebrated Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit with wind and fire on the followers of Jesus gathered in Jerusalem, which became the birth of the church. When the Spirit comes, we know that it’s going to keep on blowing and moving and changing things.

But what these words of Jesus reveal to us is another aspect of the third person of the Trinity. The Spirit doesn’t only show up in these high moments of God doing a new thing. The Spirit stays with us, abides with us; in the dark days, through the trials and tests, the Spirit is there, even in the mundane, daily grind. The Spirit is God with us always, revealing hope, or the presence of God. The Holy Spirit works in and through us as well; speaking words of wisdom at the right time, and at other times, in the presence of a non-anxious friend who shows up with a casserole.

At those times in life when we think we cannot go on, when we are struggling with the weight of suffering. At those moments when words can be hard to bear. God is with us in the presence of the Holy Spirit, holding us close, abiding with us, and leading us out of the darkness into light.

And it is not just the Holy Spirit who is with us. We believe in a God who is revealed to us in three persons: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. This expression and experience of a triune God shows us the eternal nature of God, who was there in the beginning; who came into the world to take on our human experience; and who stays with us, leading us into a future with hope.

For our eternal and everlasting God, every ending is a new beginning; every death is also a moment of resurrection. God the Father, God the Son and God the Spirit are inviting us into an endless dance that does not offer us weak platitudes or shallow truths but is a cycle of ending and beginning; of suffering that produces perseverance, and perseverance that builds our character, and character that allows us to receive hope.

I want to leave you with a blessing by the poet Jan Richardson:

Jan Richardson
A Blessing When the World is Ending

Look, the world
is always ending
somewhere.

Somewhere
the sun has come
crashing down.

Somewhere
it has gone
completely dark.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the gun,
the knife,
the fist.

Somewhere
it has ended
with the slammed door,
the shattered hope.
Somewhere
it has ended
with the utter quiet
that follows the news
from the phone,
the television,
the hospital room.

Somewhere
it has ended
with a tenderness
that will break
your heart.

But, listen,
this blessing means
to be anything
but morose.

It has not come
to cause despair.
It is simply here
because there is nothing
a blessing
is better suited for
than an ending,

nothing that cries out more for a blessing
than when a world
is falling apart.

This blessing
will not fix you,
will not mend you,
will not give you
false comfort;

it will not talk to you
about one door opening
when another one closes.

It will simply
sit itself beside you
among the shards
and gently turn your face
toward the direction
from which the light
will come,
gathering itself
about you
as the world begins
again.

Thanks be to God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Now and forever. Amen.