

“When the Math Doesn’t Add Up”

Genesis 1:26-31

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

June 7, 2020 Trinity Sunday

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

When Trayvon Martin was killed, and then his killer exonerated by a jury, our two boys were teenagers. We lived a few blocks from a convenience store, and they, almost always in hoodies, wore a path between our house and that store, coming back, not usually with Skittles and tea, but with energy drinks and corn nuts. They were about Trayvon’s age, they were doing the same thing as Trayvon, wearing the same teenage-boy uniform, but we knew that what had happened to Trayvon would never have happened to them. And if it had, their killer would have been promptly arrested, and unanimously convicted. No question.

I’ve lived my whole life in this country, and my whole life I’ve known that what we say as a nation, and what we do, don’t add up. Liberty and justice for all. *E pluribus unum*. All men are created equal. But, to quote George Orwell, “Some... are more equal than others,” which is just bad math, because “equal” means “equal.”

Is it any wonder Americans score so poorly on standardized tests? Is it any wonder the mental health system is overwhelmed, when we try to force our minds to believe something that

is patently untrue? When we twist ourselves in knots trying to insist that evil is good and good is evil? When we live, day after day, year after year, with this soul sickness?

How can we correct this math, so that our values and our words and our actions can finally add up?

Today is Trinity Sunday. One God in Three Persons. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. However you name them, the Trinity is a guide and model to getting our math right. Because whichever Person is taking the lead in a particular moment, the others are alongside in perfect agreement, willing the same will; seeing the same vision; working for the same end. Listen to our reading from 2 Corinthians:

Finally, brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

The three Persons don't so much add to one another (because one plus one plus one doesn't equal one) as *multiply* one another. Because grace multiplies love multiplies communion. Three to the power of one.

In speaking of the Trinity, the Brazilian theologian Leonardo Boff points out that, "Christianity's most transcendent assertion may well be this: In the beginning is not the solitude of One, but the communion of Three eternal Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In the remotest beginning, communion prevails."¹

¹ Leonardo Boff, *Trinity and Society* (Orbis Books, 1988).

Furthermore, that communion is among three equals, with no one of the them dominating. Three equal Persons in perfect relationship, perfect alignment, perfect congruity. That's the image in which we humans are created, in *our* beginning. We are created to live in that same, deep relationship of equality--sharing space, sharing power, sharing purpose.

It is painfully clear today that who we have become does not conform to the divine image in which we were created. The grace of Christ which multiplies the love of God which multiplies the communion of the Spirit is not reflected in the math of our life together. Instead there is racism multiplying fear multiplying inequality. Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd—these are only the most recent victims of our deadly math that sickens and kills black, brown, and indigenous people, just as it killed Trayvon Martin and so many, many others.

In her book, *I Bring the Voices of My People*, Womanist theologian Chanequa Walker-Barnes defines racism as:

...an interlocking system of oppression...designed to promote and maintain...the notion that White people—including their bodies, aesthetics, beliefs, customs, and culture—are inherently superior to all other races and therefore should wield dominion over the rest of creation, including other people groups, the animal kingdom, and the earth itself. White supremacy is a systematic way of ordering societal systems...so that political, economic, cultural, and social dominance accrues to Whites. It is independent of any individual person's feelings toward people of other races.²

² Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *I Bring the Voices of My People: A Womanist Vision for Racial Reconciliation* (Eerdmans: 2019), 43.

The viral sin of White supremacy has infected our nation for over 400 years. It has infected nearly every dimension of our life together, including (especially) the church. In fact, throughout the centuries the White church has been complicit in its spread.

Is there another way to live—a way forward—a cure that returns us to that divine image of holy Trinity—to deep relationships of equality, of shared space and power and purpose?

Walker-Barnes offers six tools for Christians on the journey towards justice and reconciliation.

The first is to **be held captive** to the conviction that “reconciliation is our central mission as Christians” [210]—that it is the core of the gospel and that, without seeking it, we simply aren’t Christians.

The second is **confession and lamentation**—confession for white Christians, in particular, of our “active participation in and passive complicity with white supremacy;” [213] and lamentation for the suffering caused by this spiritual pandemic. Christians of all colors need to express the grief, the pain, the rage that arise from this systematic oppression. We need to howl. We need to weep. We need to wail. Because if confession is the acknowledgment of our responsibility to work for healing and justice, lamentation is the acknowledgment that, ultimately, we cannot get well without God’s divine help.

And then, says Walker-Barnes, we must **stand in solidarity**, aligning “ourselves with one another in ways that embody the society we are attempting to build.” [216] For white people, that means stepping out of the *center* of power, and moving to the *margins* to learn from and be led by those who are oppressed.

We must keep **Sabbath**, so that this work doesn’t consume us. For all of us, but for people of color, in particular, working for racial reconciliation demands “inordinately high

levels of emotional, spiritual, physical, intellectual, and social labor.” [223] To sustain it, we need to stop and spend time with God, so that we can be renewed and reminded that “the grace that entrusts the work to us also empowers it.” [224]

And speaking of **grace**, we must cultivate it for ourselves and others. Because we are all broken, but we are all, also, so much more than what anyone can see on the surface.[225] Grace means having a stance “of compassionate cultural curiosity” [226] and it also means sticking with one another even when we don’t want to. It means listening deeply to one another, not when it’s easy, but when it is most difficult.

And it’s all difficult. Impossible even. Except that Walker-Barnes adds one final step: **we must watch for God**. She says, “watching for God is an act of holy observation and subversive hope. In the midst of turmoil, chaos, and despair, it asks, ‘What is God doing, and what would God have us to do?’” [229]

Which brings us back to the Trinity, because when we watch God and ask what God is doing, that’s what we see: A community of Persons in complete solidarity and equality, sharing space, sharing power, sharing purpose.

To turn to that way of living from how we are now may be the hardest thing we’ve ever done. It’s like leaping from basic arithmetic to trigonometry. But not doing this work, and staying as we are—that’s way harder, because right now, none of us can really breathe.

But by the grace and power of God, we can be caught back up into the life-giving math that is at the heart of holy Trinity, the image in which we have been created—where grace multiplies love multiplies communion.

A community in which we can all, finally, breathe safely, breathe freely, breathe as one.