

Trinity Sunday
John 3:1-17

The Divine Dance*

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The Church of the Transfiguration
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As most of you know, it's been a little over a week since our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, preached his remarkable sermon at the royal wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle.

I've been amazed at how the Presiding Bishop's twelve-minute sermon has gone viral on social media, and how the Episcopal Church has found its way into popular culture this past week. It's not every week that the PB is parodied on Saturday Night Live, or makes an appearance on The View!

But beyond Bishop Curry's charisma and rhetorical genius, I think what really struck a chord with the two billion or so wedding viewers around the world was his message about the power of love. As Bishop Curry said in his sermon: "unselfish, sacrificial, redemptive love changes lives." Indeed, this power of love *can* "change the world." Just imagine how different things would be, Bishop Curry said, if love were truly "the way" of the world.

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Today is Trinity Sunday, the first Sunday after Pentecost. This is the only feast day in our liturgical calendar that celebrates a theological doctrine, as opposed to a religious person, event, or object. Now I know that some of your eyes might already be glazing over at the mention of the words "theological doctrine." Doctrine, in the minds of many, is boring stuff.

But I believe that the doctrine of the Trinity is actually anything but boring. It is not just about some abstract or dry formula. Rather, it is about the power of love – precisely what Bishop Curry preached about at the royal wedding. That is, the doctrine of the Trinity is a shorthand way of acknowledging that love is at the very heart of God's being.

Let me explain. Because God is three in one – creator, redeemer, and sanctifier (or Father, Son, and Holy Ghost) – God is, by definition, never alone. God is always in relationship with Godself. As such, God is always in community. And thus love – perfect love – is at the very heart of God's being.

Theologians through the centuries have tried to explain the Trinity by using all kinds of metaphors. One metaphor is that of water. Water can exist in the three forms of liquid (at room temperature), steam (by boiling), and ice (by freezing). In the same way, the Trinity is one substance and three persons.

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Other explanations have included St. Patrick's comparison of the Trinity to a three-leaf clover. With the clover, you also have three-in-one: that is, three parts united in one leaf. There are many other metaphors; you get the idea.

But the metaphor of the Trinity that I like the most comes from the Greek word *perichōrēsis*. *Perichōrēsis* literally means to "dance around." For me, dancing is a beautiful way of understanding the love that is shared among the three persons of the Trinity.

I think of the famous painting by Henri Matisse called "Dance (1)". Some of you may know this colorful Fauvist painting, which is at the Museum of Modern Art here in Manhattan. It depicts a number of individuals holding hands and joyfully dancing in a circle. For me, the painting powerfully conveys the love and community that is at the heart of the Trinity.

But the Trinity is not just *God's* passionate dance of love. *We* are also part of the story. The Trinity continually beckons us to join in the divine dance. God yearns to be in relationship with us, because God is relationship itself.

If you look closely at the Matisse painting, you will see that the two dancers who are at the front of the painting are actually not holding hands. Rather, there is a small gap or space between their hands. This, to me, is a visual invitation for each of us to step in and to join the dance.

In the same way, God invites us to join in the divine dance. Some of us may accept God's invitation right away. Others, however, may need a bit more time to respond.

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In today's gospel reading, we hear about an individual, Nicodemus, who is one of those persons who needs a bit more time to respond. Nicodemus was, as John tells us, a Pharisee and an important leader of the religious establishment. Nevertheless, he was attracted to Jesus' teachings and wanted to learn more about them. But, given his status as a "teacher of Israel," Nicodemus was afraid to be seen with Jesus in public. And so he visited Jesus "by night."

The Reformation theologian John Calvin was not very kind to Nicodemus. In fact, Calvin coined the word "Nicodemite" to describe religious people who say one thing but secretly do another.

But perhaps you and I might have a bit more compassion for Nicodemus. After all, who among us hasn't had similar experiences of being both attracted to someone *and* ashamed of that person based upon what our friends and family think? I've certainly had my Nicodemus moments.

I think, for example, of my freshman year in college. I had a friend named Liza, whom I met at a picnic during orientation week. I was always impressed by how smart Liza was and her strong commitment to issues of social justice. One evening, I was on my way to the dining hall when I saw Liza standing in the common room, wearing a pink triangle. She was collecting signatures for a petition in favor of a state-wide gay-rights bill.

At the time, I was still wrestling with the closet. As a result, I was afraid to associate publicly with other LGBT people – let alone sign a petition with my name on it. And so I walked right by Liza, head down, without even looking at her. I'm not proud that I did that, but I did.

But I eventually had my Nicodemus moment. A few months later, I was seriously thinking about coming out of the closet. And who do you think was the first person I spoke to about this? Liza, of course. Even though I didn't want to be associated with her in public, I visited her "by night" in order to find authentic community.

(By the way, Liza and I have stayed in touch. She is now an attorney in the Midwest. She and her spouse have been together nearly three decades – and they have a daughter together. And, best of all, they are actively involved in their Episcopal parish!)

Have you ever had a Nicodemus moment? Have you ever wanted to get to know someone better, but you could only do so "by night" for fear of what others would think? Have you ever yearned to break out of the isolation of a closet of any kind, in order to find authentic community with others? The pastoral theologian Emmanuel Lartey has written:

[S]ome of our most profound understandings about life come from conversations and consultations with people we talk to "at night," people we are often afraid to be seen associating with.

The story of Nicodemus does have a happy ending, however. Despite his initial hesitation to join in the divine dance of love, and his decision to approach Jesus "by night," Nicodemus eventually finds the community that he was looking for.

Later in the fourth gospel, we see that Nicodemus has the courage to publically defend Jesus before the Sanhedrin, the powerful religious assembly and tribunal. Nicodemus gently reminds his colleagues that, under Jewish law, anyone who is accused has the right to a hearing before being judged.

And towards the end of the gospel, we see that Nicodemus actually steps forward to help Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus' body. In fact, Nicodemus brings a hundred pounds of spices to prepare the body for burial. Nicodemus is faithful to Jesus to the end.

By the end of the gospel, we see just how far Nicodemus has come. Yes, he initially came "by night" to see Jesus. But, slowly, with God's grace, he was drawn into the divine dance of love that is the Trinity.

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On this Trinity Sunday, we give thanks for the divine love that is at the heart of the Trinity. As Bishop Curry preached last Saturday, the power of love can change the world. It changed Nicodemus' life, and it can also change ours.

How might God be calling you to join in the trinitarian dance of love?