

The Church of the Transfiguration
Trinity Sunday
John 16:12-15

The Divine Relay Race

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This morning I'm going to do something that I've never done before in two decades of ordained ministry. I'm going to talk about sports. As many of you know, I often draw upon topics such as opera or musicals to illustrate my sermons. So please bear with me while I try something new.

Recently I was watching YouTube, and I came across some interesting videos of Jesse Owens. Owens, as you may know, was the great African-American athlete who was the first American to win four gold medals in a single Olympics game.

Owens' wins at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin, Germany, were significant because they upstaged the ruling Nazi party's attempt to showcase its ideology of Aryan supremacy. So much so that Adolf Hitler refused to meet with Owens after his wins because he didn't want to be seen shaking hands with a person of African descent.

One of the things that I learned from watching the YouTube videos was that Owens competed in the relay race, and that's how he won his fourth and final gold medal. The relay race is, of course, the track and field event in which four athletes take turns running a segment of a race. They hand off a baton to each other until the last one reaches the finish line. (Even I knew that!)

It turns out that Owens was not even originally scheduled to run in the relay race. The coaches added Owens to the relay race team on the day before the event because he was the fastest sprinter on the U.S. team. Owens' presence not only ended up giving his teammates a huge lead, but they set a world record that remained unbroken for twenty years.

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Today is Trinity Sunday, and it's a special day in the liturgical calendar. As Fr. van Dooren noted in his weekly email update, Trinity Sunday is unique in that it is the only feast day that commemorates a theological doctrine. Now some of my priest friends shudder at the thought of preaching on Trinity Sunday, but, as a trained systematic theologian, I actually quite enjoy it.

As you might imagine, there are many technical concepts about the Trinity that can make one's head spin. I'm talking about fancy Greek and Latin words such as *homoousion*, *perichoresis*, and *filioque*. There are also many important individuals and entities involved with

the history of that doctrine, ranging from the Cappadocian Fathers to the First Ecumenical Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople.

But at the end of the day, the Trinity is basically about one thing: community. Let me say that again. At the end of the day, the Trinity is about community. As Christians, we worship a God for whom relationship and community is so important that the Godhead is itself a community of three persons. As we sang in this morning's stirring processional hymn, our God is "Three in One, and One in Three."

If you think about it, God is never alone – God has always been a community from the beginning. In the beginning, the fourth evangelist writes in his prologue, was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. We hear about this in today's first reading from Proverbs, which describes how divine Wisdom – which many biblical scholars have understood as the female manifestation of the Word – was present with God at creation.

Now some of you might be aware of the different ways in which theologians over the centuries have tried to describe the inner workings of the Trinity. Some, like St. Patrick, have likened the Trinity to a three-leaf clover – which has three leaves, but is one clover. Others have likened the Trinity to water – which has the three different forms of water, ice, and steam, but is ultimately one substance.

But I would suggest that there's another powerful image of the Trinity that is evoked by today's gospel reading. And that's the image of a relay race – the event for which Jesse Owens and his teammates won the Gold medal in the 1936 Olympics.

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Let me explain what I mean. In today's gospel reading, Jesus hands off his ministry to the Holy Spirit. Jesus is talking to his disciples at the Last Supper. The disciples are scared and distracted because Jesus has just told them that he will be going away. Do not worry, Jesus tells them, because I will send you a helper – the Holy Spirit. You will not be alone.

In the reading, Jesus tells the disciples that there are still many things that he would like to say to them. But he recognizes that the disciples are unable to process that information right now. He says to them: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now."

So what does Jesus do? Basically he tells the disciples that he will be passing the baton to the Holy Spirit.

Like a runner in a relay race, Jesus knows that his ministry with the disciples will be coming to an end. (Looking back, we now recognize that this moment occurred at the Ascension, forty days after the Resurrection.) At that point, the Holy Spirit will pick up the baton and take over. That is the significance of Pentecost Sunday, which was last Sunday. Jesus handed things off to the Holy Spirit at that time. Jesus tells the disciples: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth."

Now how will the disciples know that the Holy Spirit is trustworthy? Because the Holy Spirit does not speak on his own. Instead, the Holy Spirit will take what he has received from Jesus – the baton – and will share it with the disciples. Just as Jesus received the baton from God the Father at the incarnation, the Holy Spirit will receive the baton from God the Son at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit will “glorify me,” Jesus says, “because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.”

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As I mentioned earlier, the complicated theological doctrine of the Trinity can be summed up in the idea of community. And that’s why the image of the Trinity as a relay race – in which each member of the trinitarian community picks up the baton to help out the others – is such a powerful image.

But there’s another aspect of today’s gospel reading that you might not have noticed. Specifically, Jesus expressly names the fact that the disciples are in a difficult place. Jesus wants to tell them many more things before he leaves them, but he knows that the apostles cannot “bear” it at the time.

The Greek word that is translated as “bear” in this passage – *bastazo* – literally means to bear or to carry a heavy or burdensome object. Later in the fourth gospel, John uses the same word to describe Jesus’ carrying of the cross to Golgotha. The word *bastazo* is also used elsewhere in the New Testament to describe the carrying of a body or a corpse. In today’s gospel reading, the disciples need help from the Holy Spirit because they are weighed down by their troubles.

I don’t know about you, but I’ve felt a lot like the disciples recently in terms of reaching the limit of what I’m able to bear. It seems like every day there’s another tragedy or horrible event that is piled on top of what is already a heavy psychological and emotional load for all of us. As we know, the COVID pandemic is not yet over. And on top of that we have the other pandemics of gun violence, white supremacy, antisemitism, political gridlock, the chipping away of our constitutional rights, and the Russian war in the Ukraine.

Part of me hesitated to name all these things because it *is* so much. But I think it’s healthy to list all the things that are weighing us down. No wonder sometimes it feels like it’s all too much to bear.

But here’s the good news. Neither I – nor you – need to bear this burden all by ourselves. In fact, we *can’t* bear it all by ourselves. In today’s gospel reading, Jesus recognizes the fact that there are times when we simply cannot bear the weight of what is being placed on us. And that’s where community comes in. Just as the three persons of the Trinity share in each other’s burdens through the divine relay race, Jesus sends us the Holy Spirit to share in our burdens.

As St. Paul writes in today’s epistle, the love of the Holy Spirit is poured into our hearts. And that love is what will turn our suffering into endurance, our endurance into character, and our character into hope.

And community is also what the church – that is, our parish community – is for. Yes, sometimes things are in fact too much for any one person to bear. That was the case for the disciples at the Last Supper. The answer was not for them to soldier on without any regard to what else was going on in their lives. Rather, the answer was for the disciples to lean on community – not just the community of the Trinity, but also each other. And that is how they ultimately got to the finish line.

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So I invite you, on this Trinity Sunday, to reflect upon the image of the divine relay race. Think of that race as an image for the inner workings of the Trinity in which the three persons lighten their loads by handing off the baton to each other at different times.

But think also of the divine relay race as an image for how each of us can move forward when – like the disciples at the Last Supper – things are too much to bear. We never have to bear our burdens alone. That is why Jesus sent us the Holy Spirit on the Feast of Pentecost. And that is what the church is for.

Community. At the end of the day, that's what the Trinity is about. And community – both divine and human – is what we celebrate on Trinity Sunday.