

Trinity

First Congregational United Church of Christ

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Some time ago, longer ago than I would like, I reached the point in my life when I concluded that I had more of my life to look back upon than I had to look forward to. It's a sobering realization, but it doesn't have to be a depressing one. One of my favorite theologians, Richard Rohr, has argued that the only thing that God isn't good at is math. Not because God can't do math, but because God doesn't want to do math. God isn't into measurement and quantification. God is into what can't be measured and what is eternal. And that's encouraging at a stage of life when one needs all the encouragement one can get.

So, how much time is left for me, and for you, isn't as important as how we live the lives that are left to us. And as for the past, well, increasingly I have tried to move away from any regrets I may still entertain, any disappointments, any feeling of lack of fulfillment, any pondering of a bucket list, to simple gratitude. In other words, as I get older, I try not to fixate on what I've done, or what I haven't done, or what I can no longer do; I am increasingly grateful for the life I have been given, for the love I have experienced from childhood on. And I've been thinking a lot about people to whom I am grateful, most of them now gone, but all of them very present in my memory. It's not a bad exercise. I recommend it. Gratitude is never a bad exercise.

As I looked at the lectionary texts for today, Trinity Sunday in the church calendar, and I realized that the Gospel lesson for the day from Matthew is commonly referred to as “the Great Commission,” I thought about one of those people to whom I am still profoundly grateful to these fifteen years or so after he left us. Scott Libbey was the Executive Vice President of our church’s Board for World Ministries. I was the Middle East executive and he was my boss, and my friend. One of my many fond memories of Scott was an occasion when he and I were both participants in a program at one of our church’s closely related seminaries, Eden Seminary, near St. Louis. After a day of workshops on mission, Scott preached at the closing worship service. His text was our passage: that passage from Matthew called the Great Commission.

There are some New Testament scholars who have argued that the words of the Great Commission were more likely the product of an expanding Christian movement than the actual words of Jesus. Scott didn’t necessarily endorse those sentiments, but he confessed to an acute discomfort with the way those familiar words have been used over the years. Read in the way that the writers of the King James version of the Bible probably understood them—we are all products of our time—you can almost imagine an imperialist Jesus, dispatching his followers to conquer the whole world in an ambitious colonialist mission. You know, “Onward Christians Soldiers,” and all that. After he had shared his discomfort with how the passage had been used by the powerful to subdue and infantilize the weak, Scott plopped down in the pew beside me. Then the choir rose and burst into a full-throated rendition, of, you guessed it, “Go ye therefore into all the world.” Scott whispered to me, “I guess they didn’t get the memo.”

But I've thought a lot about those words of the Great Commission. A lot. After all, like Scott, and like my wife Pat, who was also a missionary, I was a mission executive. And I've concluded that when we look at what Jesus actually said to his followers, there is a more faithful, and certainly a kinder way to understand Jesus' instructions to them than how they were translated by those royally appointed scholars in a way that could be used to justify conquest and domination, and, yes conversion in its most narrow sense of getting people to change the name of the team they belonged to.

There is that word "disciples," for example. "Made disciples of all nations." But do you remember what Jesus said to his disciples about what it meant to be his disciples? Yes, he said, disciples are followers, or students, but Jesus told his disciples that they were more than that. "But"—that important contrasting conjunction "but—but I have called you friends," he told them. So perhaps a more faithful understanding of making disciples is "making friends." Despite all the stereotypes of missionaries as in James Michener's *Hawaii* —and yes those were Congregational missionaries—or in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible*—those were Baptists—almost to a person, the missionaries I knew, upon their retirement, reflected not on what they had done, but upon the friends they had made. "I received so much more than I ever gave," was their touching and heartfelt mantra. Time after time, I heard this, to the point that I expected to hear people say it during their exit interview. And these words were sincere words, often accompanied by tears.

And then there is that word "nations." In Jesus' time, there were no "nations" as we understand them today. The nation state is, in the scope of human history, a recent invention. What we read as "nations" is a translation of the Hebrew word, "goyim," which meant "non-Jews," or "the others," the "not us." So another, and I

think more faithful rendering of the Great Commission might be, “Go out and make friends of people you’ve been told you should have nothing to do with. Embrace the other.” And that is precisely what Jesus did throughout his life and ministry. And yes, it’s one of the things that got him into trouble.

And finally, “baptizing.” Baptism is not a procedure—“I want to have my baby ‘done’ here” was how one mother put it to me. Baptism isn’t an act of claiming; baptism is an act of blessing, mutual blessing.

One of my favorite writers is Marilynne Robinson. In her novel *Gilead*, Robinson has her protagonist, Pastor John Ames, himself the son of a pastor, reflecting on his effort as a small boy to baptize a cat. “Everyone has petted a cat,” Pastor Ames reflects, “but to touch one with the pure intention of blessing it, is a very different thing. It stays in the mind. . . . There is a reality in blessing, which I take baptism to be, primarily. It doesn’t enhance sacredness, but it acknowledges it, and there is a power to that.” So, to continue with my tentative alternative translation of the Great Commission, “Go out and make friends of people you’ve been told you should have nothing to do with. Bless them, and be blessed by them.” It’s a kinder, gentler Great Commission.

But what does all this have to do with this day in the church calendar when we honor the Trinity? Well, most obviously, our text for the day includes all three members of the Trinity. In fact, the lectionary readings for any Trinity Sunday inevitably incorporate texts where the three members of the Trinity are mentioned together or in close proximity. There are not a lot to choose from, actually. The word “trinity,” much less the doctrine of the Trinity, is nowhere to be found in the Bible. It’s a later invention of the church. But later doesn’t mean inferior; or inauthentic. It just means later. It’s always important to look at origins; but it’s also

important to recognize the possibility and value of development, of evolution. It's not an either/or proposition.

The Trinity is called a doctrine because it's a teaching (the Latin root is from the verb "to teach"); so a doctrine is something that points toward a deeper reality without claiming to be that reality. It's the Buddhist distinction between the finger pointing to the moon and the moon itself. Religions, with all their differences, tend to focus on the finger at the expense of the moon to which the finger is supposed to point. So the question is whether the doctrine of the Trinity is really doing its job; is it teaching? Does it bring us closer to God?

I began today's little reflection with telling you about the growing importance of gratitude in my life as it grows closer to its end. Let me conclude it with a confession and an accompanying affirmation. My confession on this Trinity Sunday is that I haven't always appreciated the doctrine of the Trinity. In my conversations with our Abrahamic siblings in the faith, Jews and Muslims, I have felt that the Trinity can be a stumbling block suggesting as it does, a compromising of the fundamental and austere monotheism of our parent Judaism and our sibling Islam. How can we really reconcile our monotheistic claims to the worship of one God, while we sing our praises of the three members of the Trinity? And what about those other traditions where divinity is to be found in multiplicity. "Only three?" a Hindu once asked me, admittedly with a mischievous wink.

But here's my affirmation to accompany the confession: more and more, and I hope it's a sign of belated wisdom, I am recognizing the profound truth of the Trinity. The Trinity tells us something fundamental about the nature of God. It is that God doesn't exist in splendid isolation from God's creation like a benevolent, or punitive, or capricious despot. It tells us that embedded in God's very nature is

relationship, that we find God and God finds us in relationship, in our relationship with God and in our relationships with each other. God creates us; God comes to us as one of us; God animates us with God's spirit: Creator, Christ and Holy Spirit. It's all about the relationship. That's what those missionaries were telling me when they marveled at the fact that they had intended to give, and ended up receiving. That is, I think, what the Apostle John meant when he said, simply, "God is love." Love doesn't exist alone; love requires relationship. It's not a transaction; it's a relationship. Love is a noun that makes no sense without its also being a verb. Love requires a lover and the beloved. True love is when the lover and the beloved become interchangeable.

The people who invented the Trinity as a way to teach about God used another image. They talked about the Trinity as being a "dance," and in the ancient Near East a dance would have been something like a hora, or a circle dance, like the American square dance, where there is no soloist, no leader, just an interchange of movement, a kind of divine/human back and forth; an explosion of joy.

Our sacrament of communion, which began as a joyful meal, can seem to be a solemn business: blessing of the elements, private consumption of bread and wine in silence. Maybe it should be more of a feast when our family joins with God's family, of which we are also a part, and we enjoy each other's presence. So think of today's images as we commune with the Trinity: an exuberant dance, and a meal, not a happy meal, thank God,—but a joyful meal. Think of the Trinity as an explosion of joy.

Amen,