

The Holy Trinity. That's a daunting thing to consider. God's nature is so complex. The concept of the Trinity can be so confusing. One God, three persons. Three in one and one in three. Very difficult to grasp rationally.

To our limited human minds, it is something of a mystery.

And yet, there's something fundamentally important to God's nature as Trinity. God as Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer. God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

At heart, God is primarily a community. God is one. And yet, at the core of his nature, there is a wonderful mutuality and interplay. At the core of God's very nature is loving relationship.

The Trinity is not an easy concept. There are tensions. There are paradoxes.

The Lord before whom even angels veil their faces, the God who is high and lifted up, that same God came to earth as a human being. Jesus was touchable, Jesus was observable with our senses. And yet, that same God also dwells with us in a different way. More intimately. Not in a body. But in us through the Holy Spirit.

So is God remote? Yes. Is God intimately present? Yes. Is God touchable? Yes. Is God untouchable? Yes. Is God singular? Yes. Is God plural? Yes.

So many tensions. So many paradoxes.

And yet, why should we be surprised? Because God's creation is also full of tensions and paradoxes.

Think about atoms. You know from middle school science that atoms are made up of three kinds of smaller particles: protons, neutrons, and electrons. Three very different kinds of particles in the one atom. Electrons go whizzing around in orbits around the relatively stationary protons and neutrons which form the nucleus of the atom.

It always amazes me that protons can be in a tiny nucleus together. Protons all have the same positive charge. Normally, you might expect protons to fly away from each other, just like magnets with the same polarity repelling each other. But protons end up sticking together in the nucleus.

And negatively charged electrons should repel each other. But they combine in various ways to form the strongest sorts of chemical bonds.

What's amazing is HOW these parts stay in relationship with each other, and also function.

And the answer is this. Protons, neutrons, and electrons stay together because they are constantly sharing things with each other. They constantly exchange energy by exchanging particles with each other, back and forth, all the time.

At the most fundamental levels of the universe, particles overcome their tendency to repel each other. And they come together. They don't exist in isolation. They are tied together by an exchange of energetic particles. In physics, those particles have names like photons and gluons.

But when it comes to the church, those particles have different names. In 2 Corinthians 13:13, Paul calls them, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit."

What binds Christians together? Grace. Love. Fellowship.

Christians can be very different from each other. Yet they can be bound together in one family by sharing grace, love, fellowship.

There's a wonderful gift here. In our hyper-polarized society, the church is one of the last places where you can find people with differing political views who come together, in this case, to worship God together.

At times this can be a strain. But it's also a tremendous gift. I would say that we haven't always appreciated what an amazing gift it is. These past few months of social distancing have been a reminder that we shouldn't take our church family for granted.

We have been worshipping God by being tied together in an online format. It's been a wonderful thing that we've got the technology to enable us to do this. But this experience has also shown us how important coming together in person is.

Hopefully we'll be far less likely in the future to take the gift of our church family for granted.

And I think we can take an important lesson from what Paul told the church in Corinth almost 2,000 years ago.

The Corinthian Christians were tempted to form into factions and groups. And yet Paul was encouraging them in 1st and 2nd Corinthians to love each other, to be unified in worshipping God together.

And Paul ends these letters with a final thought, a final wish, a final prayer, a final blessing.

In our Epistle lesson, Paul concludes by asking that the Corinthian Christians live together in peace. He asks that they let God's love and peace bind them together. He asks them

to greet each other lovingly with a Christian kiss of peace, a holy kiss. (Of course, they weren't in the midst of pandemic and social distancing.)

But then Paul concludes with a Trinitarian blessing:

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion (or the fellowship) of the Holy Spirit be with all of you."

Paul is telling the Corinthians that if they're going to be a Christian community, they have to embrace and exchange grace, love, and fellowship. Those are the little particles they have to pass back and forth amongst themselves. Those are the forces that will bind Christians together regardless of any disagreements. And they are still important for maintaining Christian unity in the hyperpolarized world that we live in.

Grace. We have to ask God to pour his grace upon others. We have to pray for those with whom we disagree. God may change their minds. God may change our minds. Or we may continue to agree to disagree. But bottom line, prayers for those with whom we disagree are vitally important.

Love. Jesus told us to love our enemies. If he calls us to such a high standard, I have no doubt he would also say, "Love those Christians with whom you disagree." We might not like everything that they do. But we have to look for tangible ways of showing our love for them, in spite of our disagreements.

Fellowship. When you spend time with someone, you often are able to see them as real people, not issues, not caricatures. If we get to know people, we just might find that the things we agree upon far outweigh the things that divide us. We might find that we often have similar values, even though we might reach different conclusions as to how those values should be expressed.

If you're going to be held together as a Christian community, you need God's grace, God's love, God's fellowship to be with you, and to be shared amongst you. You need to be exchanging these things with other members of the body, passing them back and forth across the fences between you. You've got to let these forces serve as bungee cords that tie you to each other even as they give you the flexibility to be on different sides of various issues.

And we have the full spectrum of opinions and views at St. Paul's. Offering grace, love, and fellowship is extremely important right now. I don't spend a lot of time on social media. But I have noticed a number of St. Paul's members posting this week. And sometimes there are disagreements, and that's fine. You all have freedom of speech and everyone has the right to express their opinion.

However, as your pastor, I do want to add a gentle warning. When you disagree with someone on social media and get into back and forth discussions, remember who these people are. They are your friends, your family, your fellow church members. I would gently suggest the following litmus test before you post.

Ask yourself, if I was in a face to face discussion with this person or these people, would I say things in this way? Or might I be a little more careful? I would gently suggest that you never say something to someone on social media that you wouldn't say to them face to face.

And yes, on social media, maintaining bonds by exchanging grace, love, and fellowship is vitally important.

And of course, we also need grace and love and fellowship desperately in our divided country right now.

Like everyone I was horrified by the brutal homicide of George Floyd on the streets of Minneapolis. I've also been disturbed by the looting and the rioting that has followed. I've also been disturbed by excessive force used subsequently by a couple of police officers in Atlanta. And I've been horrified by attacks on police officers that have occurred subsequently.

And I worry about Sgt. Alex Cline of the Williamson County sheriff's department. Sgt. Cline is my brother-in-law, my baby sister's husband. Thus he's also my kid's Uncle Alex. And I worry about Alex during these times. And I worry about my sister who has to watch him put on his badge and uniform and go out to do a dangerous job as a peace officer as he protects and serves others.

In our hyper-polarized country, it's too easy to try to over-simplify the complex events of the past couple of weeks. And we need to be careful not to do so.

We've seen some people let the actions of a few bad apples, a few bad actors tarnish the reputation of a whole group. And we need to be careful not to do so.

Yes, we've seen a few police officers break the law, and yes, they must be held accountable. But we also have many, many police who risk their lives to uphold the law, and protect and serve their fellow Americans.

And we've seen rioters and looters who wreak havoc and destruction, and they must be held accountable. But there have been many, many peaceful protesters who are exercising their Constitutional rights to peaceably assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

Thus it's dangerous for us to equate a few bad cops with most cops, or to equate a few violent protesters with all protesters.

Yes, it's been a difficult couple of weeks to watch all of these events play out in our country. But I have been heartened, here and there, by other occurrences.

I have been impressed by police officers and protesters kneeling together in prayer.

I was impressed by the sheriff in Flint, Michigan who took off his riot helmet and put down his baton, and talked to the protesters, and then walked side by side with them. He later

said that from a tactical standpoint that was probably a mistake. But as a human being it was the right thing to do. In his words, "It was the best decision I've ever made in my career."¹

I was impressed by George Floyd's brother trying to calm the situation in Minneapolis. He has been saying to that community that looting and rioting are NOT the way to honor his brother.

I have been impressed in our own community. This past Monday night, our Lubbock Police Chief, Chief Mitchell and a number of his officers as well the mayor and city council members participated in solidarity with other community members, walking together to protest the death of George Floyd.

And last week we had a potentially ugly incident with a man waving his gun at a protest. As he was being disarmed, a Lubbock Police officer was knocked to the ground. And in the raw video you can see several protesters rushing to aid him, and you can hear their voices, "Officer, are you OK? Officer, are you OK?"

Such things give me hope. We can reach out to our fellow human beings. Exchanges of grace, love, and fellowship can bind us together despite our differences.

On Trinity Sunday, we worship the one God who exists in relationship within himself. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in Trinity of persons and Unity of being.

May our triune God shed his grace upon our troubled nation. May God help us reach out in love across the divides between us. May God help us to seek liberty and justice for all.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore. Amen.

¹ Sheriff Chris Swanson of Genesee Co, MI, quoted in WSJ 6.06.20: *After George Floyd's Killing, Police Departments Change How They Discipline Officers*