

Sermon, Trinity Sunday
June 7, 2020
The Rev. Paula Jefferson

In the name of the Holy and undivided Trinity, Amen;

I am with you always, to the end of the age

In 2008, an Episcopal Priest, Murray Trelease, was staying in my home for a family wedding. We were comparing notes on what we were reading and suddenly Murray said, Paula, I think you should read *The Shack*. Well, it was a new book at the time and one I hadn't heard about. Murray didn't want to give me too many details...no spoiler alerts...but he offered that it held an interesting way of experiencing the Holy Trinity. Of course, I read the book...you never know when Murray is going to pop into your world with a letter, e-mail, or visit...and I'm that person who likes to be prepared. So I open the book expecting to hear the author tell me what the Trinity is...Maybe a cyclone of generative love that is drawing everything into its vortex. Maybe a heavy-duty theological lecture on kenosis or self-emptying Love.

But, no. There are no theological dissertations in *The Shack*.

Instead the first chapters introduce Mack, a dad who will experience unthinkable pain: the abduction and murder of his child. Descending in his own vortex of grief and then depression, Mack is startled when he receives an invitation to go back to the Shack where his child was taken. He goes. He finds "the Shack" and enters it. Inside this shack, the world is transformed and three characters emerge to walk alongside Mack in his grief. They have names, but they represent God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

During introductions, Mack asks, "are you God?" and all three characters answer in unison, "I Am". And then they giggle at the inside joke.

There were theologians who found the book heretical. And, I think, if you were reading the book hoping the author would tell you what the Trinity is, you might feel it comes up short. Yet, if you read it as a way that we experience God in the realness of our lives, there is Hope, Compassion, Friendship, Wisdom, and Love—Incarnational Love.

Together, and apart, we've been making our way through the Covid-19 pandemic. *It has, and it will, impact every community on earth...because the virus spreads human to human. Wherever there are humans, there too will the virus be.*

This virus threatens our relationships, our understanding of independence, our health, our wealth, our traditions our sense of security. It fuels the fire of those who believe we have the right to pursue our version of happiness, without regard to the impact on others. It fuels the fire of those who believe that we are one Body, and each of us is interdependent on the other.

We are embroiled in a mess. As individuals and as a human community.

For me, the first 7 weeks of the Pandemic were pretty easy. Every morning, Dursey and I took a 5k trek around the neighborhood—some days we walked, some days we jogged. I was working in the Hospital as a nighttime chaplain...using Amazon Fresh and Tom Thumb to send groceries to folks who were unable to get to the store safely.

My backyard had become a gathering space: One neighborhood family going through divorce allowed their kids to come to the back yard for smores and play time with my dog. 2 neighbors with dogs scheduled play dates with my dog so they could come sit in the back yard and natter while Dursey and his canine guest ran wild. I had planted a vegetable garden with enough squash and zucchini, tomatoes and cucumbers to supply my neighbors.

On the evening of May 4th, a chaplain friend came to the fire pit to visit. He'd had a rough day and wanted to talk. Dursey brought us his soccer ball, so while we talked, we dribbled the ball back and forth and then kicked it for Dursey.

At 8pm, I told Dursey there was "One More Kick" and then it was time to close up shop for the day. I kicked the ball hard. And when I landed, my left ankle rolled—breaking in two places.

In that moment, life as I knew it—even Pandemic life as I knew it—stopped.

As I lay on the grass, I remember thinking it will take 3 months for the ankle to be stable again. And just as I was wallowing in that self-pity, the chaplain asked how he could help me. I snapped unkindly that he might consider getting the dog off me. I was absorbed in anger because my chosen lifestyle had stopped and I knew it.

In the Shack, Mack is angry with God—Mack wants answers. Where were you when I needed you? God responds, "when all you see is your pain, you lose sight of God".

Incarnational Love is always with us. Lying on the grass, I was not alone. When I finally opened my eyes and looked up, there was the chaplain, *holding Dursey by the collar*. He helped me hobble into the house, brought ice for the ankle, walked the dog, and offered to take me to the hospital.

The very same people who had been coming to my backyard during the pandemic continued to come. But now the shoe was on the other foot...I needed their help. They walked the dog, scheduled play dates for Dursey, brought cookies, food, and sat and visited with me.

St. Martin's friends assembled knee scooters and shower chairs. You provided rides for me to the orthopedic surgeon, picked up groceries, mail, and watered my flowers. Meals were delivered and shared. The prayer team offered prayers for healing and patience. The quiet committee offered food and help. Our bishop called and announced that I would be ordained —quite possibly on a scooter.

Even in a pandemic, I was not alone...

On Memorial Day...the very day we celebrate those who have given their lives to protect the freedom of Americans, an American police officer killed an American. It was not an accidental fire arm event. Rather, the officer put his knee on the neck of the victim until the victim suffocated. We know this because there were witnesses to the killing. None of the witnesses made any effort to stop the suffocation. The officer: white. The victim: black.

It's not a *new* story. It's *another* story in the long history of America's incomplete vision of freedom.

In the midst of a pandemic, the brutality and unjust treatment of our citizens is page one news around the world.

This is *not* the kind of society Jesus desired for us. Yet God entered our world to sanctify and redeem what God Created.

And I wonder, what will it take for us to decide that we want something more....

Something that makes all the sacrifices on battlefields and city streets and back wood tree limbs **holy**.

The author of The Shack said this about his book:

...the Shack is a metaphor for the house you build of your own pain---a metaphor for the places you get stuck, hurt, damaged...the thing where shame or hurt is centered". It is in the Shack where we encounter the Trinity, not as an esoteric doctrine, but incarnational Love, Patience, Hope.

Pandemics, broken bones, senseless killing, injustice, oppression...all that we suffer and all that we inflict on our fellow humans are openings for us to invite God into the muck of our lives and our world.

(Jesus) tells Mack, "You are the center of our Love and Purpose". Though we may sometimes feel estranged from that Love, it is all around us. In her book Holy The Firm, Annie Dillard writes: "When the candle is burning, who looks at the wick? When the candle is out, who needs it? But the world without light is a wasteland and chaos, and a life without sacrifice is abomination".

And there's the rub. We must roll up our sleeves. Mack goes to the Shack filled with anger. God doesn't wave a wand to "heal" Mack. Rather the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit walk with Mack as he confronts his anger and finds within himself the vulnerability to forgive...the humility to be forgiven....the choice to grow toward the image of Love planted within us.

Some 2,000 years ago, a small group of people began sharing their witness of Jesus Christ. *Incarnational Love has, and it will, impact every community on earth...because Love spreads human to human. Wherever there are humans, there, too, will Love be.... Until the end of the ages.*