



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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GENESIS 1:1-24a; CANTICLE 13; 2 CORINTHIANS 13:11-13; MATTHEW 28:16-20

CLAIMING THE TRINITY

What are the books that have formed your mind? I venture to say that I read often, but some books really make their home within me.

One of the books on my list is John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, loosely based on the narrative stories in the book of Genesis, the first of which we hear today. *East of Eden* is an epic American tale. It's set at the turn of the century, and laced with stark yet honest descriptions of racism, poverty, and sexism during the white settlement of the Salinas Valley in California. But it stands apart for me because of the way Steinbeck captures the dance between the characters, all caught in a complex web of relationships and trying to find their way.

One of the scenes that stands out to me is a conversation between Cal, one of the Trask twins, and his estranged mother, Kate. Cal's mother is selfish, competent and feared. In a

time when women are subject to men, Kate dominates. But the consequences of her actions are devastating for the entire town. Her son, Cal is similar in many ways. Perhaps in reaction to his tragic relationship with his mother, or maybe because of the rejection of his father, Cal is mean, strong, and lonely. Sometimes Cal admits that the way he treats his brother makes him feel sick, and yet he can't seem to help himself. He starts to wonder if meanness and despair are his fate.

Then, something shifts. He seeks out his mother, and in their conversation, he discovers something powerful.

He says to her, "I was afraid I had you in me."

"You have." Kate says.

“No.... I don’t have to be you.... It just came to me whole. If I’m mean, *it’s my own mean.*”

That is a pivot point for Cal – the moment when he realizes that he has inherited his mother’s meanness, but his fate is not sealed. He is not a bystander to his own life. He claims his inheritance and sees it then not as a curse to be afraid of, but a chance to create a new way of being that is hopeful for both him and his brother. Cal remembers and forgets this truth over and over again, but the power of his participation never lets him go.

All of us have emotional and behavioral inheritances that impact our lives and relationships. Some we inherit from mothers and fathers; others are more diffuse. Some inheritances are shameful, like white supremacy. Other inheritances are glorious, like the ideals of democracy. But all inheritances require unpacking and conscious engagement. In order to live intentional and mature lives as Christians, we have to claim our inheritances.

As Christians, one of our most treasured and glorious inheritances is a picture of God as a relationship among three diverse persons: a Holy Trinity.

For thousands of years we have professed faith in God as a divine communion of three

multi-faceted beings whose mutual love for one another overflows among us. This conception of God is both mysterious and provocative, for no one person in the Trinity **dominates** the other. Instead, they reflect and amplify one another in love.

The doctrine of the Holy Trinity was solidified in the 3rd century, and it decentralized top-down, dualistic thinking about who God is and what God wants. As Sarah Coakley reminds us, the “three persons of the trinity are in no way hierarchically or ontologically ordered.” This doctrine held through the Reformation and many divisions of Western Christian denominations. The Holy Trinity remains central to our understanding of what it means to be Christian across the world, and what it means to be made in the image of God.

This is a glorious inheritance! And yet, rarely do we in the western world recognize or depict God as a relational community. It’s as though we haven’t yet found a way to fully claim it yet.

Usually, I think people tend to see God as an individual, as an authority figure, maybe. And we project upon this authoritarian god the same social forces we experience ourselves – dualisms that elevate male over female, Father over Son over Holy Spirit, domination over mutuality. As Walter

Brueggemann writes, *“It is our normal way to classify people as us and other. It is our normal way to prefer males to the other gender. It is our normal way to distinguish heteros and the other. Our usual normals make us safe. Make us happy, leave us certain.”*

But such dualisms are not of God. In fact, they are heretical in light of the Church’s own doctrine of the Trinity, a doctrine that proclaims God as three mutual persons empowered to love freely and impartially.

So, move with me past the dualistic constructs of paternalism and gender implied in Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Wonder with me what difference it could make in our lives if we could truly claim as ours the trinitarian God – a beloved community of mutual self-giving, and creative, redemptive power.

When Jesus was one of us, walking around and talking, he was always referencing his Father in funny ways. He would say to the disciples, “if you have seen me, you have seen the Father. I am in the Father, and the Father is in me.” And he would say “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and then **you** will be **my** witnesses...” None of this made any sense at the time, but later, we came to understand the context: Jesus’s life was a communal one. It was a window into a divine

companionship, a sacrament of a gracious, relational dance. Jesus consistently dismantled the idea that relationship with God could be divorced from relationship with neighbor. In his commissioning words to his disciples he instructed them to follow him, essentially saying, “reframe the world in the divine context I have lived and taught among you. Share this invitation to divine communion with everyone, everywhere.”

Thousands of years later, we as Christians are still commissioned by these words. In the waters of baptism, we commit our lives to the community of Christ. We re-commit ourselves to that promise every time we baptize new members, renouncing sin and selfish forces, and committing to consciously choose our responses to one another, with God’s help.

And now we are the icon of Christ in the world – we are the visible sign of the divine communion. We are collectively called to decenter ourselves and bear witness to one another, and to claim one another as fellow image-bearers of God, just as Jesus promised.

For those of us who are white, I think that means decentering cultural whiteness and declaring with our words and actions that black lives matter. It means bearing witness to the experiences of people who are oppressed, and voting with them in mind. It

means dismantling expressions of Christ that communicate implicitly or explicitly that we are self-sufficient, as though we could know and reflect God without the presence and perspective of marginalized people. It means owning our power to make changes in our own lives.

Did you know that global studies of civil resistance movements suggest that the resistance of 3½% of the population is enough to ensure a successful campaign for change? Three and a half! That is the power of a small but mighty community claiming their collective power to bear witness to one another in love.

But hear me: this kind of love will cost something. In other words, the love to which we are called as Christians is not about feeling good about ourselves, or finding a way to feel normal again, or even about regaining control. Far from it – we seek to continue the disruption – to transform the inheritance we are passing on so it looks more like the Trinitarian God we proclaim. We will make mistakes. We will try and fail. But we have to participate.

We are living in a watershed moment. Our nation has lived with systemic racism for centuries, but now many of us are finally seeing it differently – see how we participate in the ongoing problem by our silences, fears and fragilities. The threat of forceful domination of protesters from our President is unsettling the world. The Pandemic rages on, and it's getting hard to bear.

But we must not passively accept this fate now.

It's time to claim our inheritances, both the shameful ones and the glorious ones, so that we can live freely and consciously as outposts of the Holy community of God. What we have inherited, be it meanness, selfishness, white supremacy, that must not be the end of the story.

Let it be a beginning.

Let's claim the image of God's self-giving love as our hope. Let that love soothe you, and then, let your participation in the Divine Communion change the world.

References:

John Steinbeck's book *East of Eden*

Sarah Coakley's *Brief introduction to God, Sexuality, and the Self*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0gxtplgBg>

Walter Brueggemann's book *Virus as a Summons of Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Uncertainty*

Credit goes to Audre Henry on The Next Question series for quoting the book *Why Civil Resistance Works*. A brief summary and link to the Ted Talk are here:

<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2019/02/why-nonviolent-resistance-beats-violent-force-in-effecting-social-political-change/>

