

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
Trinity Sunday (A) ~ 4 June 2023
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda
Genesis 1:1—2:4a
Matthew 28:16-20

What have you done for me lately?

Almighty God, you have given us grace at this time with one accord to make our common supplication to you; and you have promised through your well-beloved Son that when two or three are gathered together in his Name you will be in the midst of them: Fulfill now, O Lord, our desires and petitions as may be best for us; granting us in this world knowledge of your truth, and in the age to come life everlasting, Amen.

I imagine that most of us here have had the experience of going to a social gathering – a party, perhaps, or even Fellowship Time here at Church – and being asked, after a few moments of initial pleasantries,

What do you do?

That question tends to pop up quickly, doesn't it, along with

Have you lived here long? and Where are you from, originally?

Notice that we don't lead with

What's your sign? or

What blood type are you? or

To what political party do you belong? or

What religion do you follow?

Those questions would seem odd, or invasive, wouldn't they? They would not be deemed appropriate for casual conversation.

Yet we have no problem asking a stranger what they *do*.

I find this really curious, and I think that the question speaks volumes about what we as a society value.

We are what we do. We are what we produce.

At our monthly Vestry meeting last Tuesday evening we discussed this very phenomenon. I had asked your lay leadership to read an article about what the Gospel has to say to the affluent – and, in turn, how this congregation might share that Good News with our neighbors who struggle with isolation, or with finding a sense of worth. We had a really powerful conversation.

One Vestry member spoke about the pressure experienced by mothers who have chosen to be at home to raise their children. For these women *What do you do?* can be a really loaded question. Not always, of course – but I suspect often. The same might be said about those who have retired, or who are between jobs.

As a blog post I read this week put it,

The question *what do you do* is tied not only to work, but identity. Certainly, often when people ask *what do you do*, what they're really trying to know is *who are you*. *What judgment can I make about you by knowing what you do?*¹

Amen, Amen.

I would add, *How can I categorize you? Into what box can I put you?*

And, implicitly, *How am I going to relate to you?* As an equal? As someone I should accord respect? Or as one whom I can use, as a means to an end?

I've spoken before about the *instrumental*, transactional way in which we often regard other human beings. I don't think I'm overstating it when I say that it is the root cause – or at least very near to the root – of what is wrong with our world. It's what I call the "Janet Jackson" mentality: Remember her song, "What have you done for me lately?"

This is a real problem, theologically. When we reduce people to what they *do*, we strip them of their inherent identity as beloved children of God. What happens when, as a result of age, or health, or other life circumstance, one can no longer "produce"? What about when one *chooses* not to "produce"?

¹ <https://medium.com/the-philosophers-stone/stop-asking-what-do-you-do-7a9bbeb269bb>

What might the Gospel have to say to this? Jesus is pretty clear:

Look at the birds of the air, He says. They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? (Matthew 6:26)

I'll end my rant here (for now, at least), but – and – I do think that it's important to be mindful of how we relate to one another, how we categorize one another, how we assess one another's worth.

And if it is problematic to reduce one another to our roles, to what we do, how much more so is it to try to place *God* in a box?

As you know, today in the life of the Church is Trinity Sunday, which is a somewhat unusual feast in our liturgical calendar. It is dedicated to a doctrine, rather than to an event in the life of Jesus or to one of the Saints. This doctrine gets its own feast day because understanding God as Trinity – as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – is at the very heart of the Christian faith handed down to us over the centuries.

I'm sure that it comes as no surprise that much theological ink has been spilled trying to "explain" the Trinity throughout the history of the Church; it's a concept that has mystified scholars and saints alike for generations. How can one God be in three Persons? What does that *mean*? And what about those for whom that imagery is problematic – perhaps because of the gendered language for God?

One of the ways that, even today, the Church tries to get around these difficulties is by identifying the Persons of the Trinity as God the *Creator*, God the *Redeemer* (Jesus), and God the *Sustainer* (The Holy Spirit, Whom we celebrated last week on Pentecost). In our own time using these labels appears to be in an effort to think more expansively about God. At a moment in human history in which some are calling into question the female-male binary, avoiding distinctions such as *Father* and *Son* may seem to be more inclusive.

The problem is that it is considered heresy.

I'll explain:

In the third century, the Roman priest and theologian Sabellius argued that God ought best to be understood according to the *roles* God assumes in relationship to our world: Creating it, redeeming it, or sustaining it. I won't delve into the intricacies of Sabellian theology right now – although I am happy to explore them with you another time – but the important

thing to know is that, since later in the third century, the Church has condemned that explanation of the Trinity as a heresy known as *modalism*.

Why? Because it understands God in terms of what God *does*, rather than in terms of Who God *is*, inherently. It is heresy because God is described according to various *modes* of interacting with the world – creating it, redeeming it, or sustaining it. In other words, God is understood in terms of how God impacts *us*. Gulp. We put God in a box. But it's never been about us.

You see where I am going with this.

What have you done for me lately?

Indeed, the gendered Father/Son language for God may, in fact, be problematic for some or many of us. We tend to use male labels because Jesus – the historical figure Who walked the earth 2,000 years ago – was decidedly a man, and He called God “Father.” *Abba*. Daddy. Some argue that we just as easily could refer to the Trinity as “Mother, Daughter, and Holy Breath.”² Again – a conversation (and an intriguing one, at that!) for another time.

The point is that the Church understands the Trinity, the triune God, as *inherently* relational, as a *community*. And that communal nature defies categorization. The three Persons of the Trinity share the same substance and are bound together eternally in a relationship of mutual love. Overflowing, abundant love – love that cannot be contained, love that cannot be pinned down or put in a box, love that is always generating more. Not as roles, or modes, or anything that God can *do* for us.

Now, stick with me here:

In this morning's Lesson from Genesis, we are reminded of yet another fundamental doctrine in both Judaism and Christianity: Namely, that

*Humankind was created as God's reflection:
in the divine image God created them...*

That doctrine, *Imago dei*, lies at the heart of the Baptismal Covenant and our promise to

² The Very Rev. Sam Candler, “On Trinity Sunday, We Lean Into Relationship” (Atlanta: The Cathedral of St. Philip, June 7, 2020).

strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being (BCP, p. 305).

The contemporary theologian Daniel Migliore puts it this way:

The image of God is not like an image permanently stamped on a coin; it is more like an image reflected in a mirror. That is, human beings are created for life in relationships that mirror or correspond to God's own life in relationship.³

Human beings are created for life in relationships.

But here's the thing:

Relationships are dynamic, aren't they? Anyone who is partnered or married probably can attest to this firsthand.

When I prepare a couple for marriage, I always remind them that the Church understands their union as a *call* from God – that God is bringing them together to do and be together that which they cannot do or be on their own. Couples often assume I mean children, but it goes beyond that. When we enter into relationship with another, energy is generated; a certain *alchemy* takes place, and something new is created. And when God enters the equation? Watch out!

I began with the beautiful prayer attributed to St. John Chrysostom, words said regularly in the Daily Office. I commend them for your own devotions. In that prayer, we are reminded that, when we come together as the People of God, God shows up. And we are changed, as a result.

This may be challenging, because relationships – real, intimate, life-giving relationships – demand transformation, expansion, growth. They are not transactional, or instrumental. They are not a *quid pro quo*: You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. And that can be threatening because it disrupts the *status quo*. It explodes the box in which we have placed ourselves, or others, or God.

But that's exactly how God works. God is always inviting us into God's own dynamic nature. God-as-relationship is, by definition, so much bigger than our limited language and

³ Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Grand Raids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014).

imagination can comprehend. Nothing in the created world, including our finite human intelligence, can contain the vastness of God.

And thanks be to God for that. Thanks be to God that we are created in God's image, and that God is not created in ours. We are called to regard one another and ourselves as products of God's overflowing, generative love. We are called to a life marked by love and respect, beauty and wonder, imagination and the unexpected. We are called to love God for Who God *is* not for what God *does*. And we are called to love one another – and ourselves – that way, too.

May it be so. *Amen.*