

## **“The Trinity”**

### **Romans 8:12-17**

In our life together, we encounter experiences and teachings that are difficult to understand. A month ago we had a funeral service for Olga Retsch who was Divinity’s librarian for many years. She survived WWII by surviving a “work camp”. It’s difficult for us to understand how humans were mistreated during WWII.

Olga shared with me her story of being 14 years old, being forced into a labor camp, being force to walk naked for disinfection, and surviving on one ball of flour, potatoes, and one loaf of bread per week, while working hard to produce radar equipment. They cooked the flour and potatoes on a pot belly stove in their barracks.

Olga said, “Hunger is a terrible thing”. How many of us understand that kind of hunger?

There were greener pastures on this side of the Atlantic but the waters were not still when Olga, along with her son Paul and her mother came across on a troop carrier in what Olga described as a “rough Atlantic”. They were welcomed by our Statue of Liberty, her son was not taken away from her, and they quickly made their way to Cleveland to rejoin her best friend from the labor camp. Her husband, Dick, joined them later.

Olga summed up her life with these words: “We achieved the American dream. We have always honored and respected one another and continue to give back through our children and our church.”

As pampered as we are today, it's difficult to understand or comprehend Olga's experience in Germany during WWII; just as it's difficult to understand or comprehend the refugee crisis today.

When World Refugee Day arrives on June 20, we will be several years into the largest refugee crisis the world has ever seen. Extreme weather, poverty and violence are pushing our neighbors to migrate.

In March, Cyclone Idai killed 1,000 in southeastern Africa and left 110,000 in refugee camps. In Yemen, searing conflict and extreme poverty forced 3 million people to flee their homes; 280,000 have sought asylum in other countries. Closer to home, San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa in Honduras have the highest homicide rates in the world.

These are three of many hot spots around the world. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 68.5 million people are displaced – one third are refugees and many are children. At the risk of sounding cliché, what would Jesus do?

The ELCA is responding to this crisis in a variety of ways. Through ELCA World Hunger and Lutheran Disaster Response we accompany our displaced neighbors, meeting their immediate needs and providing long-term holistic support. Through ELCA AMMPARO (Accompanying Migrant Minors with Protection, Advocacy, Representation and Opportunities), we walk with Central American children and families who migrated to the U.S. and face challenges at home. And we welcome refugees to the U.S. by supporting Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS).

Eighty years ago this month – when 1 in 6 refugees was Lutheran – the ELCA’s predecessor church bodies, the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod and other Lutheran organizations found LIRS. One of the oldest refugee organizations in the U.S. LIRS assists migrants and refugees with resettlement, foster care services, family reunification and other programs. Though some criticize this ministry, to ignore our refugee and migrant siblings would contradict God’s will.

From Adam and Eve to Abram and Sarai, the Bible is filled with stories of migrants and refugees. The Exodus, the central story of the Old Testament, recounts Israelite slaves fleeing Egypt, then migrating to Canaan.

God’s word urges us to show hospitality: “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19:34).

In the New Testament, Jesus’ family fled into Egypt during Herod’s persecution. Later, Jesus tells a story about the end of time when the Son of Man separates the nations as a shepherd separates sheep and goats. The sheep inherit the kingdom: “For I was hungry and you gave me food – I was a stranger and you welcomed me – just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me” (Matthew 25:35-45).

This issue is personal for me. As a high school student, I will never forget my home congregation sponsoring Vietnamese refugees. As I listened to their stories, my heart softened. I

am a pastor, in part, because I saw my community of faith doing something that mattered in the world. LIRS saves lives. You are part of this work.

Today we know the need is great, yet the U.S. administration has set the ceiling for refugee arrivals at 30,000 a year. (Canada, on the other hand, will welcome around 330,000 refugees this year.) For context, U.S. refugee admissions peaked in the 1980s, welcoming some 200,000 annually. That may seem like a lot, but in 2005, in the months following Hurricane Katrina, Houston absorbed more migrants from nearby New Orleans.

Refugees are legal immigrants. We must not shut our doors to them because we're afraid.

So on this Trinity Sunday, rather than debating about the nature of Father, Son and Holy Spirit (or Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier, or whatever terms we're using these days), maybe we should be focusing on the real essence of the Trinity — the power of relationships.

In Romans 8, Paul doesn't try to line out a systematic theology of how God works. He uses trinitarian terms interchangeably — the Spirit, Father, Christ — but doesn't try to make it a treatise on metaphysics. Rather, Paul sees God at work in a uniquely relational way, both within God's own nature and with humans.

After admonishing his Roman readers in verses 12-13 to discern the difference between living in the flesh (focusing on the self-oriented life) and the Spirit (focusing on the God-oriented life), Paul then shifts the language to relationships — that those who live by the Spirit are adopted by the Father as children of God and co-heirs with Christ, whose glory is realized through suffering (8:14-17). Whatever the Trinity is in *being*, the purpose of God, the three-in-one/one-in-

three, is to bring humans back into relationship with God and thereby back into relationship with one another no matter what country we grew up in.

Our connection with the Trinity is not to be a head trip where we simply meditate and ruminate about the nature of God, but a heartfelt relationship that is made real through the Spirit of God/Spirit of Christ/Holy Spirit “bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (8:16).

That’s a different view of God than you can get from a picture. Perhaps we’ve made too much of the distinctive shape of the Trinity, which we see most often depicted as a triangle with three hard sides. The thing is that triangles are not that common in the natural order of God’s creation. Think about it — where do you see such hard edges naturally occurring? You could make the case, then, that triangles are, more often than not, human constructs and that our triangular, pyramid-based diagrams and explanations about God’s nature are just that — human attempts at divine definition.

What about a different shape — an alternative description, a subtle shift of perception? John of Damascus, one of the early church fathers who lived during the late seventh and early eighth centuries came up with a wholly different term for the oneness and threeness of God — *perichoresis*, which loosely translated from Greek means “circle dance.”

In other words, the Trinity is not primarily defined by the distinctiveness or unity or “substance” of the persons involved, but rather as a circle — a dynamic community defined by love. To see one is to see all — to dance with one is to dance with all, being invited into the circle

and into a love relationship where we see God face to face, as children hold hands and dance with loving parents.

Circles are natural, appearing everywhere from the sun and moon to the earth itself. Makes sense then, that we should be thinking of a circle as the dominant paradigm that shapes our understanding of God's creative and relational nature. You can't define a circle by its points. You can only define it as a whole. And it's pretty easy to differentiate a circle from a triangle. That's why I use 3 interlocking circles to picture the Trinity in confirmation class.

The truth is that we'll probably never understand the Trinity by trying to define it. Even Paul, one of the most prolific writers and theologians of his day, runs round the idea. The only way we'll really "get" the Trinity is to join the circle and live into that relationship with God and with all of God's children.

What a difference that makes!

May the peace of God . . .

Opening - #413 – Holy, Holy, Holy

Sermon - #412 – Come, Join the Dance of Trinity