

Living Wisely, Living in the Trinity

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Proverbs 8

Every weekday morning and evening, I take a short walk between my house and the Columbia Heights Metro Station. On that walk I step over trash, past rats, and around the clusters of international students walking to and from their nearby English classes. I also, for about a minute or so, walk straight through the courtyard of one of the neighborhood's government housing projects. I don't know anyone there, but I usually see some familiar characters: nursing mothers, kids playing football, packs of teenagers coming from or going to school. I also see some of the familiar characters of modern American lower-income life: high-school drop-outs, drug dealers, the unemployed and those fighting to stay in school and in jobs when so much of our society tries to push them out. In the part of D.C. I live in, it--unfortunately--goes without saying that virtually all of these "characters" are African Americans.

Now, I don't *have* to walk through this courtyard everyday, but when I moved into my current house 9 months ago, I decided I would. There were really two reasons for this decision: First, it cuts about one minute off of my commute. Anyone who, like me, appreciates that one extra minute of sleep understands that logic perfectly. But second, given that I work on Capitol Hill and am mostly surrounded by middle to upper class white folks, I knew I needed a daily reminder of what life is like for most of the world.

The hope was that, in those two minutes a day I would gain some sort of wisdom that would help me, in the rest of the day, to be the kind of person who confronts the injustices suffered by those living like those in the housing project. I suppose I hoped that my short walk would lead to some conversations, and conversations to friendships. But that hasn't happened. Apart from a handful of headnods and a couple "what's ups"s, I remain a stranger to them, and them to me.

It's 50 years after the Civil Rights Movement, 250 years after the founding of America, supposedly for the cause of "liberty and justice for all." It's now 500 years after Anabaptists first protested the oppression of the marginalized through a unique blend of community, economic sharing and pacifism. And, of course, it's 2000 years after the death and resurrection of the Prince of Peace, yet here I am, walking through an all-black housing project for 2 minutes a day thinking I'm somehow resisting the oppression and segregation that still characterize our daily life.

Now, I'm not suggesting that such small gestures aren't important and potentially powerful. And I must admit that, like many of you, my full-time job deals with bringing about just relations and just policies for the marginalized. But when I reflect on the how deeply ingrained injustice and violence are in our world--how little progress we seem to have made in the last 50, 500, 2000 years--it's easy to see even my job as just a token gesture against greater forces of evil. For all our hard work, an examination of our

newspapers and our neighborhoods, our social lives and, yes, our churches, reveals that our communities are still all-too-often characterized by the division and oppression we seek to eliminate.

If 2 minutes a day and, perhaps, even our jobs aren't enough, then what can we do? What wisdom can we find to help us turn the historical tide in favor of the just peace we, as Christians, proclaim?

This morning I would like to suggest that such wisdom can be found in the old idea of the Trinity. Now, I realize this idea may strike some of you as irrelevant, and even as foolish. The Trinity over time has been used in all sorts of horrible ways, from the execution of Michael Servetus--the 16th-century Anabaptist who refused to believe in the Trinity--to the reinforcement of societal gender roles. Nevertheless, the idea that the God we worship and proclaim is, at base, a unified community of diverse persons--3-in-1--should give us pause. The notion that just, faithful, and caring relationships are at the center of God's self should, I think, cause us to reconsider the "relevance" of this ancient way of talking about God...when confronted by places such as our neighborhood housing projects.

Perhaps what may seem more irrelevant than examining the Trinity at all is examining it through the Proverbs. The Trinity, of course, was an idea that emerged long after the book of Proverbs was compiled. But it is in the passage of Proverbs read a few minutes ago that we first get any details about what it might mean for God to *be* community.

Proverbs 8 pictures Wisdom as a woman walking around a town's public spaces--primarily its law courts and markets--offering to teach anyone who will listen. What does she teach? She teaches about the good life: how to maintain faithful relationships--especially with one's partner--how to avoid financial ruin, how to peacefully resolve conflicts. I realize, in this era of the "prosperity gospel," it's easy to dismiss Proverbs for presenting a too-easy road to this good life: "trust God and see your bank account grow." But Proverbs is more complex than that, and this story of Woman Wisdom walking around town is a story about what it means that God cares about every bit of our lives. God, Proverbs tells us, isn't just about the big events--the exodus, the cross--but about your job, about your family, about the day-to-day justice and quality of our communities--the good life.

Woman Wisdom, in our passage, is the means by which God helps us do these things well. God created us *with* Wisdom, and we live well *by* Wisdom. Wisdom is a kind of mediator, uniting God and humans as she teaches us to follow God's ways in our day-to-day lives. Because she was there when all of this, all of us, were created, she knows the ways it works, and can teach us those ways. Further she's paid close attention to us, and knows, in the midst of these complex, broken societies we've set up, how to get at God's best.

Wisdom's job as our teacher comes from her relationship with God as Creator.

Wisdom herself characterizes this relationship as "delight." As she accompanied God in the act of creation, God delighted in her, and she, in turn, delights in us. God is in a kind of delightful, creative community with Wisdom, and that community spills over into a delight with us. When we respond to Wisdom, following her teachings, we join in that delightful community, attaining the good life.

Participating in God's own community, then, becomes the way by which we live life well. And living life well, paradoxically, becomes the way by which we participate in God's community. As we look to God, answering the call of Wisdom, we see what God's community is like: it's delightful. It's not characterized by injustice or unfaithfulness. It's not characterized by the segregation and inequalities of my neighborhood's housing projects. But it's based on mutuality, trust, and creativity. Our meditations on God's community--our prayers, our worship--then lead us to pattern our own communities on God's. Mutuality, creativity, delight--these are what we aim for in creating our communities. And as we live in such communities, we find anew what God's community is all about. That, I think, is worth thinking about when we walk through our neighborhood housing projects.

The reading we heard from John's Gospel takes us farther in the direction of what we think of as the Trinity. There Jesus tells his disciples that, after he dies, he will send the Holy Spirit to continue teaching them his ways, ways Jesus repeatedly says he learns from his Father. There we have it as we all know it: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Whenever Jesus mentions the Spirit in John's Gospel, he emphasizes that the Spirit's role is to teach the disciples (and the rest of the world) how to live--the "truth" which has been revealed by Jesus' own life. In our passage the Spirit's teaching role is described as "glorifying" Jesus. This is much as Jesus, elsewhere in John, talks about his role of "glorifying" the Father (e.g., 14:13), and the Father "glorifying" him (cf. 17:24). Later on, in a prayer, Jesus asks that this intense love shared between him and his Father would characterize the relations among his disciples (17).

Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as Trinity, are in a community of mutual glorification and love. Like Wisdom, the Spirit is given to us so that we might imitate that community. Again, we learn what our earthly communities are supposed to be like by participating in God's community, by living life in the Spirit. And we participate in God's community by following the Spirit to properly order our own communities.

This paradox is familiar to Anabaptists throughout the ages. Many early Anabaptists based their preaching of the new community around the Trinity. Original "Mennonite" Dirk Philips went as far as seeing the relationship between the members of the Trinity as the basis for economic sharing. More recently, John Howard Yoder has argued that talking about God as "Trinity" was the way early Christians found to say that God is one, but best known through Jesus--Jesus who's life, for Yoder, demonstrates the meaning of pacifism, economic sharing, ethnic inclusion, and so on. In other words, far from being out of touch with reality, the delightful community of the Trinity has, throughout our history, been an inspiration to those seeking God's justice in the world.

It is often complained that Christian teaching is obsolete and confusing, out of touch with the elegant, "scientific" worldview now in place. There may be a certain awkwardness about putting paradoxes at the center of our faith, but when the paradoxes are this good--when they result in just, delightful community life--then I'm not sure I can accept the criticism. Indeed, I'm not sure that this world God created isn't waiting for *us* to embrace these paradoxes and to allow them to remake our communities. When I walk out of my front door--past the trash and the rats, through the housing project, to the Metro, to my job on Capitol Hill--I'm not sure that this idea of Trinity isn't *vital* to how I go about my business. We proclaim our God to be the God of creation, the God of the universe. When we see that this God is in fact mutual, just community, it ought to make us think about whether or not we are really looking to God as we work for such communities on earth--if not, can our communities really be called mutual or just? Thinking about God as Trinity also ought to make us think about whether or not our communities are really characterized by mutuality and justice--if not, can we really say we follow God? I know that tomorrow morning, that's what I'll be thinking about.