

The Hive

Michael Battle's Sermon ©

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Trinity Church Boston

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Lectionary: Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17

I'm a member of Amazon Prime's First Read club. How I'm being herded by marketing and AI to read particular books will be another sermon. What I'd like for you to know now is at the beginning of each month I get to select a free book to read, and when Amazon is especially gracious I get to pick two free books. They are usually new authors or hard to sell books. I was surprised to find the #1 New York Times best selling author Greg Olson on the list. I didn't know much about him other than his genre seemed to be murder mysteries which I'm not terribly excited about. I hope the same is true of you, Trinity Church—that murder mysteries do not excite you!!!

Greg Olson's book that I put in my online shopping cart is entitled, *The Hive*. (Which is the name I have on my car's license plate by the way: Hive. And I didn't select this license plate name because of the book—because for a long time now, I have been fascinated by hive life forms; more about that later). Back to Olson's book and the particular section that facilitates my sermon for the namesake of this congregation here gathered, Trinity.

The main character claims to have mysteriously been caught up in a swarm of bees that lifted her off the ground, and instead of stinging her to death, the bees healed her, enfolded her, and lifted her not just physically but spiritually. Without giving things away, in case you want to read this book, (after all it's a murder mystery and you would be angry with me if I spoiled your own epiphany to the ending of the book); so, without giving much away, you need to keep this in mind that although Marnie Spellman is the main character, she shouldn't be. She is deeply troubled and manipulating. Her last name Spellman is an appropriate name since she seems capable of holding people in her spell. Spellman states this in the book:

That brings me to my beloved bees. The way God designed these creatures nearly makes the very idea of their flight a cruel joke. Especially the bumblebee. And yet they persevere, with brute force and determination, their innate inefficient aerodynamics work just fine. One undeniable component of the impossible in the case of bees is the nectar that fuels every beat of their wings. Nectar is honey transformed. Honey is life.¹

On this Trinity Sunday I think Marnie Spellman provides a better example of how to teach about the Trinity and why Christians understand God in this way. Instead of the puzzle of One God in Three Persons explained through analogies like an apple cut in half revealing three parts: skin, fruit, core) or the analogy of water as ice, liquid, and steam, I think Spellman can help us

¹ (Olsen, Gregg. *The Hive* (pp. 267-268). Thomas & Mercer. Kindle Edition.)

understand God as Trinity in a more profound way. You see, most of our explanations for why God is trinity fall far short, neither because they are supposed to fall short since God is ineffable and cannot be fully explained by mere mortals nor do our trinitarian explanations fall short because we often provide bad analogies; no, they often fall short because they shift our focus away from who the Trinity is, namely God is Love. If you find yourself in a theological debate about God's identity, it boils down to this: God is love. The Not only does John's Gospel emphasize this but the other writers in the Johannine school in Scripture does as well. Probably the best quote to sum this up is (1 John 4:7,8):

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.

Well, the meaning of love also can lead us down a rabbit hole because the concept of love has also become self-serving, domesticated and bland. So, let's get back to Marnie Spellman and how she can help us understand God.

First, Marnie Spellman helps us understand that God is a love story but our love stories often go awry. Imagine a triangular diagram using two children desiring the same toy as an example. The two children's love for the toy is an example of how we copy each other's desires, and you'll probably be able to guess the outcome: often when we desire the same thing in common a fight breaks out. Conflict occurs. In other words, the 'love triangles' that we human beings get into, often turn sour and rotten, and we end up fighting each other over a shared love or desire.

God as trinity offers a solution to these kinds of love stories or love triangles. Instead of dysfunctional triangulation, God displays another kind of love triangle. Jesus' picture of God is so different from our common picture that Jesus even uses another word to refer to God. He calls God, Abba—an intimate description that a child would use for a parent. Jesus and his Abba enjoy perfect harmony where Jesus fully imitates his Abba. No rivalry, no jealousy, no envy exists between them as they honor each other in complete unity of purpose. Jesus and his "Abba" cooperated in their shared love for the world—resulting in perhaps the most famous scripture passage for a Christian: God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son to save the world (John 3:16).

Perhaps, the trinity is so difficult for us because the concept of three persons almost always turns into two against one, particularly when there is any kind of stress. Yet, in God three are included and no one gets excluded. Maybe, this is why it is hard to fathom God in whom three get along without one being thrown out or marginalized.

Jesus and his Abba were not like the characters in the HBO TV series, Succession, in which family members fight with conflicting desires and loves. It didn't take long for the audience to understand just how savage sibling rivalry can be. The Roy siblings in Succession, just two episodes in bicker about who should be seen to take charge. The most qualified for the job, Kendall was shot down by his father as an option for CEO, leading Roman to lash out with this

stinger about his brother, Kendall. Roman states, “What I think [our Father] meant to say was that he wished that Mom gave birth to a can opener, because at least then it would be useful.”

During Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness, the devil tempted Jesus to audition for a part in Succession, but Jesus resisted. No pun intended for the name of the character in Succession and for the name of the empire, but Jesus could have become Roman. Jesus could have given in to the devil’s temptation to make the world a contentious object of love. Instead, Jesus, being both human and God, perfectly did God’s will but more importantly Jesus perfectly became or incarnated God’s will; he perfectly came to love what God loves — namely, the world, us. Jesus perfectly transformed us beyond what to love in God’s eyes into persons who to love, just like God’s three persons who love. Often human love triangles turn toward rivalry and even forms of different kinds of death. But the end of Jesus’ love triangle with his Abba God produced life not death, even eternal life. Here enters the third person of the trinity, the Holy Spirit, known to be the one who brings us out of dysfunctional triangles gone bad and into God’s love triangle; the Spirit is the power of God’s love to help us love God like Jesus did.

Unlike Marnie Spellman in the Hive, who may initially at an early age had good intentions to build community but became a master at wreaking havoc on human relationships through triangulations, Jesus describes the triangular shape of God’s salvation through the Holy Spirit. 2000 years ago, Nicodemus did not read Greg Olson’s book, the Hive, but Nicodemus sensed a hive presence in Jesus and wanted to understand Jesus better. Where Nicodemus stumbled and tripped was over this concept of God as Spirit. Whether we like it or not, we are like Nicodemus. God as Spirit challenges our notions of God as an ineffable Artificial intelligence out there in the universe; the Holy Spirit challenges our versions of God existing in the manipulative spells we put on each other to force unearned intimacy. Like Nicodemus we want to learn about the Spirit being the way we know God’s existence through the cooperation of loving one another. When Jesus taught Nicodemus about the Spirit, in short, Jesus taught him that God would not exist without someone to love. The theological language of the three persons of God in one nature is simply another way of saying, God would not exist without someone else to love. So, just like love is unintelligible without relationality; so to is God not known outside of the Spirit of God helping us to cooperate with God’s love.

God loves us so much that God became human. The uniqueness of the Christian faith lies in this necessity of the incarnation. It took God’s love incarnate in a human being to establish this divine love triangle in history; and it takes the Spirit to gather us up into God’s love so that we can be born again, so that we all can have a new story.

Unlike Marnie Spellman’s hocus pocus, Nicodemus knew Jesus’ power transcended the world’s rivalries. Nicodemus very respectfully approaches Jesus. “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” That’s the best language Nicodemus had for the Spirit. “presence of God”. Like a toddler, Nicodemus made attempts to name his parent. The Spirit as the Presence of God came closest. Jesus knows that this particular Pharisee, Nicodemus has opened himself to God

by referring to Jesus as Rabbi. And coming after dark, Nicodemus risks his own reputation or tries to protect Jesus from the crowds. Pushing aside conversational preliminaries, Jesus addresses the heart of Nicodemus' concern. "Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.'"

Nicodemus organized his life around being good, keeping all the rules, and now Jesus says he must be born from above. He can't help but protest. "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Jesus knows it's not too late for Nicodemus but Nicodemus must see things differently in order to see the love of God. And so Jesus says, "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. It is as if Jesus says to Nicodemus, you have to accept yourself as human, ordinary, flesh and blood. Give up the rivalry to be better than your neighbor. Stop trying to prove your worth to yourself and God. Love needs no other proof of God because God is love. And here is the spoiler to the story: The Trinity teaches us that God would not exist unless there is someone to love!