

Natalie W. Bell
 Trinity Sunday
 June 16, 2019

Stronger Together
Romans 5:1-5

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we^[a] have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom we have obtained access^[b] to this grace in which we stand; and we^[c] boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. ³ And not only that, but we^[d] also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

I was reading *The Presbyterian Outlook* email this week, and Editor Jill Duffield was talking about her experience attending several high school graduations this year.

She noticed something interesting.

The ***adults who spoke*** at these commencement ceremonies tended to tell the young people—follow your passion, pursue your dreams, and be what you want to be, do what you want to do.

But the ***young people who spoke*** at graduations had a completely different focus.

They talked about how we are ***all doing life together, the importance of community, the value of relationships.***

Isn't that interesting?

Jill Duffield, *The Presbyterian Outlook* email, Monday June 10, 2019

I know that ***Millennials*** (those born from 1981-1996) get a bad rap for supposedly being selfish, and ***Generation Z*** (those born after 1996) young people are often disregarded. But truth is that the Millennial generation are very concerned about community and relationships, and apparently Generation Z feels similarly, which is pretty important, considering they are a bigger group than even the Baby Boomers!

The younger generations seem to know something important—
the power of community.

My husband Ed, after years of night school,
graduated with his Bachelor's degree from Southern Nazarene University in
May, and the ***commencement speaker was Dr. Daniel Gomis,***
a Nazarene pastor and professor from the country of Senegal, in Africa.
He gave such an inspiring message,
and it was not just a cheerleading session
for go and follow your dreams, and be who you want to be.
Which makes sense, because he was talking to adults who had gone back to
school, and others were getting advanced degrees.

His message was for young and old, alike.
And it was about the ***power of community.***
He specifically mentioned an African concept called ***Ubuntu.***
I originally heard about this from Archbishop ***Desmond Tutu*** of South Africa,
who worked on the Reconciliation of his nation after the fall of apartheid.

This Ngimi Bantu term Ubuntu basically means ***"I am because we are"***.
It is a recognition that ***our human connection makes us who we are.***
No one is an island.
Now, isn't that a message we all need to hear?
Especially since we revere such rugged individualism in this country?

Ubuntu says ***we exist because we are community.***
In Malawi it's called UMunthu, with the same meaning.

We've learned firsthand from our ***Malawi friends***
the ***importance of community in their country—***
villagers know one another so well,
they help raise each other's children, they mourn together,
they gather resources for those who are sick.
They know they NEED one another.
Here, we barely know our neighbors names,
and we can ***live for years without 'needing'*** our neighbors.
Why would we need other people?
We've got Google, Alexa, security systems, and every kind of electronic!

It seems like only natural disasters bring us together with those around us.
What are we missing?

What do the ***Millennials and Generation Z*** have to teach the rest of us?
And what can we learn from the concept of ***Ubuntu?***

All this talk of community ***is so appropriate for this Sunday.***

Today is ***Trinity Sunday***—a liturgical holiday,
Which is why we have the ***white*** paraments up here.
And although most churches ignore it,
some people argue it is ***just as important*** at Easter or Christmas—
because it celebrates the Trinity, our God—3 persons in 1.

I think it's very important,
especially in a ***time as deeply divided*** as today,
because the ***Trinity embodies community.***
The three persons in one are persons
who are in a ***community of love and relationship,***
of mutual collaboration and care.

The different persons of our One God ***work together***—
just as we see in John 16 and Romans 5 today.
God sends his ***Son***, our Savior Jesus to die for us to save us from sin,
and ***Jesus*** promises the ***Holy Spirit.***
God the ***Father*** pours love into our hearts,
through the power of the ***Holy Spirit.***
They all work together so beautifully.

And, do you remember what the name of God is in the Bible? ***I AM***
That's what ***Yahweh means, I AM.***
That's the name God gives Moses at the burning bush.

That's also the term that ***Jesus uses to describe himself***
time and again in the Gospel of John...
Jesus says I AM the light, the life, the bread, the living water, the salvation, the
good shepherd, the gate.
It is surely no accident that Jesus uses the term, I AM.
After all, ***Jesus IS God. So is Holy Spirit.***

Which brings us back to the concept of *Ubuntu*.
 Which means: ***I AM because we are.***
 Isn't that great?

Ubuntu is about relationship and community.
 Our ***God is about relationship and community.***
 Because truth is, we ***ALWAYS exist in community*** of some kind,
 whether we admit it or not.
 No one comes into this world of their own accord, right?
We exist because of others, because of relationships.
 So does the Trinity.

And just like the Trinity,
 we are ***stronger together***, right?

Trinity Sunday is often overlooked because frankly,
 it's hard to understand the Triune God.
 Three persons in one is ***confusing and mysterious.***
 It's not easy to understand,
 even though we sing about it in the *Gloria Patri and Doxology*
 every single Sunday!
 And we repeat our belief in it in the *Apostle's Creed!*
 It is mysterious,
 but what's not mysterious is that the three persons are
connected, working together, loving, and living in community.

Which brings us to ***US.***
 We are made in the ***image of God***,
 according to the creation account in Genesis, and the whole of Scripture.
 We are made in the image of God,
 and that is why Paul can call us the ***temples of the Holy Spirit.***
 It's why Jesus promised the ***Holy Spirit would live in us.***
 It's why God pours love into our hearts.

Because we are made in the image of God,
 we are ***made to work together.***
 We are ***never all alone, even when we feel lonely.***
 We need only call upon the rest of the body of Christ.
 If you follow Christ, you have a ***FAMILY*** of faith.

I heard one of you say this week that often the church family *is more like a family* than our own flesh and blood!

Christian community is powerful!

We are a band of loving relationships, just like our Triune God!

That's why Paul keeps calling us the '*body of Christ*', not just Christians.

Because we are made to work together, just as different parts make up the whole body.

Really, life is not about us as individuals, *it is about US as a community, a family of faith.*

When have *you seen this power of being better together?*

Stronger together?

I think about this every time we have a *Session* meeting, because I am always amazed that when we get the Elders together, the ideas start flowing, and the power to follow God's call is multiplied!

I was in awe at our *Ladies Lunch and Retreat* Wednesday, because I saw the power in each of those lunch tables, with women sharing their stories and their encouragement and love for one another.

It reminds me of a Christian author named Stan Ott.

He runs the *Vital Churches Institute*.

We studied some of his materials when we were going through the New Beginnings process several years ago.

He believes in the *power of community*, and the importance of *coming ALONGSIDE* one another in ministry.

He thinks that we are *doing God and the church a disservice* when we are '*lone rangers*' trying to do ministry alone.

He believes we should *ALWAYS invite at least one other believer* to join us, and help us, even as Pastors!

I have learned the power of this principle over the years of ministry, and I try to do ministry here *WITH you, not FOR you*.

I truly believe and see that we are a community of faith together—It's not me over here and you over there, right?

And I truly believe that we are called to **reflect the Trinity**.
 We are called to **pattern our lives after the Triune God**—the 3 in 1.
 We are called to **reflect the nature** of the God we follow and love!

The question is, **how are we doing?**
 How are we doing as a church—
 Are we really being the body of Christ,
Are we a loving community of believers?

I think much of the time we are—especially when we **serve** together,
 when we **worship** and **fellowship** together,
 when we **pray** together.

But we all know, **the church doesn't always show** the love of God, does it?
 That's one reason people stay AWAY from church—
 because they DON'T find the love of God in a church!

And truth be told--
It isn't easy to always be a loving community, is it?
 It's **hard** to reflect the love of God!
 We don't always see eye to eye, or get along,
 We are often in church with people who are quite different
 (which I think is wonderful)—and we have to really exercise the **grace** of God
 to love and accept our brothers and sisters in Christ!
 What if picking up our cross and following Jesus
 Means **following alongside** people we would never hang out with otherwise?

And, even when we DO love one another,
 We all go through **hard times**, in our own lives, and as a community.
 We **WILL suffer**---this is why God says 'Do not be afraid' so often,
 Because life happens, and it can be scary!
 This is why the prophets like Isaiah remind us that God is always with us,
 Especially in the waters and fires of life--
 Because there will always be **fires and floods** in our lives!

Being the body of Christ **doesn't make us immune to suffering**,
 but it does make our suffering have **meaning**!

You know, another thing that Jill Duffield noticed about the young people speaking at graduation ceremonies was exactly that!
The young people, not the adults, talked about how life will be hard,
But we can make it, because we have one another.

As Christians we know we can take that a step further.
Life is hard, but we have one another, and we have our Triune God.

We will suffer—that's a fact.
But, as Paul says in our Romans 5 passage today,
Our suffering produces endurance,
Our endurance produces character, and that character produces ***hope***—
which does not disappoint us!

Why?
Because ***God has poured love into our hearts.***
And that love of God---makes all the difference, doesn't it?

We will suffer, but our living Triune ***God can use it,***
To strengthen us, and give us---hope.
A ***hope*** that does not disappoint.
You know, I was talking to one of you this week about finding the blessing in the pain—there's always something there...and I believe God can help us find that—the blessing in our suffering, you know?

And that hope is not just for us as individuals—
it's for our family of faith, our Christian community.
That's why Paul continually uses the terms '***our***', and '***we***'.
Because we are all in this Christian life together—
And we are ***stronger together,***
we are ***better together*** than we are alone!

This is why we care about things like getting ***clean water*** for our sister Presbyterians in Malawi—
Because they are ***OUR brothers and sisters in Christ.***
We are the body of Christ with them.
We are a family of faith—together.
And clean water---builds community, in Malawi, and with us!

Teresa and I have been researching the non-profit in Malawi that will install the water wells that our Presbytery is raising money for.

Each well costs \$450, and each church was challenged to raise money for one well.

We have already raised over \$1100—

so we are on our way to building three wells, which is amazing!

If you want to know more, Google *Marion Medical Mission!*

Safe water is so crucial.

Unsafe water and lack of basic sanitation kills more people annually than all forms of violence, including war.

663 million people worldwide do not have access to clean water,

and almost half of that population— 330 million people – live in Africa!

East Africa is especially concerning,

because 84% of those water-deprived Africans live in rural areas.

Marion Medical Mission works in Malawi, Zambia and Tanzania, where ***women and children*** are especially affected.

They are the ones carrying the water to their homes.

In sub-Saharan Africa ***one in five children die*** before their fifth birthday due to water-borne illnesses from dirty water.

These women and children spend around ***40 billion hours*** per year carrying water!

And 64% of households rely on women alone to retrieve water.

The long walks can be very ***dangerous***,

Leading to harassment, sexual assault, animal attacks, and lost education as children miss school to fetch water.

It is also a great physical strain, because a typical water container weighs about 40 pounds when full, and that takes a toll on the back over time.

Marion Medical Mission has built over 35,000 wells in Malawi, Tanzania and Zambia providing over four million people with a sustainable source of safe drinking water.

Only with Christ is all of that possible!

We have the privilege to be a part of this great mission!

<https://www.mmmwater.org/the-problem>

Because the Malawians are our brother and sisters in Christ,

we have ***the obligation, and the opportunity*** to help!

It's so eye-opening to hear from our Malawian friends when they visit, or fellow Presbyterians travel there.

They KNOW about suffering, firsthand.

A kind of suffering that we can only imagine.

They face famine, flooding, drought, disease and death,

On a regular basis.

But they have learned that their ***faith in Jesus***, and ***their community***, are the keys to ***not just surviving, but thriving!***

This is one of the ***lessons*** they teach us in America.

We may think we can do life alone,

But it's so much better, so much easier, so much more meaningful,

To do life TOGETHER, isn't it?

Friends, hear the ***Good News of the Gospel*** today!

Just like our Triune God, our lives are ***better—together***.

We are ***stronger together***,

And we ***reflect our awesome God***, when we are together.

May we seek to strengthen that awesome community as we follow Christ,

And all God's people said, Amen.