Ubuntu - *Genesis 1:26-28*
Norwalk Christian Church, June 16, 2019, Trinity Sunday, Year C

This week Marti and I were at church camp. She was directing Chi Rho - middle schoolers - and I was directing Junior camp - 3rd through 5th graders. If we still look a little tired--we are!

The theme for church camp this summer is "Peace Works." And each day of camp visits a different word that opens up what "peace" means to us. And it was some pretty good stuff, so Marti and I thought we'd bring it to you, so you don't get to miss what our kids are learning at church camp.

And today, we have a word we learned at camp. It's the title of the sermon, and I want you to say it with me. It's pronounced Ooo-boo-too. Say it...!

Ubuntu. It's a word...really a concept...from the Nguni language in Africa which means, "I am because you are. And you are because of who we are together." It was popularized by the African Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who has been a leader in South Africa, helping that country heal from the brokenness of apartheid. In his book, *No Future without Forgiveness*, Tutu defines Ubuntu this way: "My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound, in yours ... a person is a person through other persons...."

"A person with ubuntu," Tutu says, "is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole."

Ubuntu is what inspired healing after the South African Apartheid. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was formed in the spirit of Ubuntu, and successfully ended that spiral of retributive violence. Through this commission, victims looked in the eye those who hurt them and said to them, "You hurt me. You committed a crime. I am a human being, not an animal, and what you did was wrong. And you are responsible for that, because you are a human being and not an animal. And I am more human when I treat you, my abuser, as a fellow human. Continuing the cycle of violence and seeking revenge, will only make me less human. So I forgive you."

Ubuntu. I am because you are. You are because of who we are together.

On the front of your bulletins is another quote from Archbishop Tutu, "You can't be human all by yourself, and when you have this quality--UBUNTU--you are known for your generosity. We think of ourselves far too frequently as individuals, separated from one another, whereas you are connected and what you do affects the whole world."

Today is, what is called in the Christian Calendar, Trinity Sunday. It always falls after Pentecost Sunday, a time where we pause and reflect on this "doctrine", "Theology" of Trinity. It's a day when we stop and ask, "What in the world is the Trinity anyway!"

And it's a day for preachers to make up some stuff, sound smart and erudite, when, in reality, we don't really have a clue. This Trinity stuff--it's a mystery. Our tradition says that the Trinity means that God is one, existing in three persons: God the Creator, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. Three aspects of God. Three parts. Three expressions. But not three Gods. One God, expressed in three ways.

Does your head hurt?

But after spending some time with these Junior Campers, I got to thinking that, perhaps, a better word for Trinity is Ubuntu.

One day at camp dinner, I sat at this table with a random assortment of 3rd through 5th graders, and when I sat down they were already in the midst of a deep, theological question. Yes, it's possible. Junior campers doing theology. And one boy had asked the table the question: "What was before God?" And they all threw out their answers--nothing, there had to be something because everything has a parent, I don't know--that was my answer. It got deep.

Of course, this same boy who asked this deep theological question, also said sin was all Eve's fault and she's to blame for suffering and all that's wrong with the world. Happy Father's Day! I about choked on my chicken nugget when he said it. "We're all to blame!" I told him. That's the point of the creation story! We're all to blame, and Adam was a punk who tried to sluff it off on Eve. But it didn't work. We're all to blame.

Anyway, that's another sermon for another time...back to the Trinity.

Our very notion of God is caught up in this idea of community. God cannot exist alone. Whatever was before God--if there was a "before God"--we do not know. But what we do know is that the God we know--the God we have always known--is a Triune God. A God who eternally exists in community.

"Let US make humankind in OUR image." God is community. One of the first Hebrew words for God was *Elohim*, which is a plural word. Gods. Let US make humankind in OUR image.

God created you and I--everyone of us--in God's communal nature. Which is to say, if we are to be who we are created to be--if we are to be like the God who made us in God's image--then we *must* be in community.

Ubuntu--I am because you are. Our every life and essence is tied up in one another.

After I got home from camp, I went out and ran some errands around town. Grocery store, gas...and while I was doing so, I was listening to public radio. BBC World. And a story came on. A group of American behavioral psychologists did a study on the stuffy subway riders in London.

In London, it isn't considered polite to talk to people on the subway. Just be quiet, mind your own business, and let others do the same. That's the London way, one man who was interviewed said on the radio.

But these behavioral scientists studied those who acted contrary to the "London way", those brave souls who dared talked to someone on the Subway. And guess what, those who had conversations with others, and those who engaged with them in conversation, strangers, they had the better experience.

They write, "Our commuters estimated that only about 40% of their fellow train passengers would be willing to talk to them. Yet every participant in our experiment who actually tried to talk to a stranger found the person sitting next to them was happy to chat...simply reaching out to a fellow human being to say hello may be better received than people realise. Few start a conversation with a stranger, but most seem happy to talk if you reach out with good intentions.... Humans are inherently social animals, who are made happier and healthier when connected to others."[1]

Ubuntu.

I came across another study. An article I read on KCCI that's been open on my phone for months waiting for a good sermon. "Regular Church-goers are happier than non-believers"[2] the title says. "The survey data analyzed adults from 35 countries, including the United States. Pew researchers observed how people identified with religion, as well as how often they attended worship services during the month. They then compared the findings to those who were either unaffiliated with a religious group or who weren't actively involved in their respective congregations."

They write, "We find that actively religious people in the U.S. are more likely to say they are very happy, that they vote in national elections, and that they're more engaged in community life in the sense that they belong to at least one non-religious organization."

But we don't need behavioral scientists to tell us what we already know. You and I--we need each other. We need community. You cannot exist without it. Ubuntu--your very humanity is tied up in the humanity of others. It's impossible to be human alone. We need each other. And the more you are with others, the more you become you.

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[1] https://www.bbc.com/news/world-48459940
[2] https://www.kcci.com/article/religion-happiness-pew-study/26324886

The very act of sharing your life with others, the act of having friends, joining a church, being in community--this may be the most God like thing we could do. For our God created us--male and female--God created humankind to be in relationship, just as God is in relationship. We are different, yet we are one.

I am because of who you are, and you are because of who we are together.

May we, the body of Christ, grow more and more into the very image of God. And may we see that image in every face we meet. Ubuntu! Amen!