Sermon – "Unbroken Circle"
Scripture: Proverbs 8:1-4, 27-31, Romans 5:1-5
Trinity Sunday, June 15, 2025
Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.
Westminster Presbyterian Church
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In today's first scripture reading, Proverbs 8, we are introduced to Wisdom, who is personified as a woman, not only in the Hebrew Bible but in much of the literature of ancient Israel's neighbors. Wisdom stands at the most populated, high-profile spaces of life offering insight, boundaries and guidance to all who will listen. Wisdom was in the beginning with God when God was creating the world, bringing order out of chaos. Thank God for Wisdom and for those who listen to her. Hear now God's Holy Word.

1 Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice? 2 On the heights, beside the way, at the crossroads wisdom takes her stand; 3 beside the gates in front of the town, at the entrance of the portals she cries out: 4 "To you, O people, I call, and my cry is to all that live. ….

27 When God established the heavens, I was there, when God drew a circle on the face of the deep, 28 when God made firm the skies above, when God established the fountains of the deep, 29 when God assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress God's command, when God marked out the foundations of the earth, 30 then I was beside God, like a master worker; and I was daily God's delight, rejoicing before God always, 31 rejoicing in God's inhabited world and delighting in the human race. Amen.

The readings for Trinity Sunday invite us to reflect on what we believe about God. Christianity is a monotheistic faith affirming one living and true God and is sometimes called *peculiar monotheism* because we uphold *three Persons in the Godhead… These three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory*, according to the Shorter Catechism. The doctrine of the Trinity was first articulated in the Nicene Creed around 325 C.E. The word "trinity" is not found in the Bible; however, we see glimpses of it in a few New Testament passages.

Our second scripture reading for today, Romans 5, is one such passage. Paul recognizes the suffering that is a part of life and affirms the love of God which will not disappoint us. This perspective allows us to live lives that not only accept the challenges and struggles but also receive strength, character and hope through them. Hear now God's Holy Word.

1 Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, 2 through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. 3 And not only that, but we 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. Amen.

The title of the sermon: “Unbroken Circle”

Text: “…suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us…” Romans 5:3b-5a

Let us pray: Holy Triune God, we thank you for the wonderful complexity of who you are and how you relate to us. May our relationships reflect your image and may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable to you. Amen.

In 2010, I officiated at a memorial service for a woman whose son requested the song "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?" a hymn written in 1907 by Ada Habershon with music by Charles Gabriel and popularized in the 1970’s by Bob Dylan and the Allman Brothers. At the time, it felt a little over the top for Presbyterians; however, we honored his wishes and, as is often the case when we least expect it, it provided a poignant and meaningful moment for those gathered to honor a woman who created a loving home for her four children and their circle of friends, a woman whose character and strength had been shaped by the tremendous obstacles she endured and overcame, and a woman who had a better home awaiting in the sky. And so, although the song never answers the question, when the music stops, there is an unspoken confidence and hope that we will not be disappointed, that *the circle will be unbroken.*

A circle is an endless line, having no beginning and no end, symbolizing eternity and God. Three entwined unbroken circles (pictured on the front of this week's bulletin) were among the earliest symbol of the Trinity reminding us that these three, eternal and unified persons (equal in power and glory) coexist within relationship.

Today is Trinity Sunday, a time to celebrate and honor this rich and complex understanding of God...an understanding that grew out of the dilemma the early followers of Christ faced.

Their dilemma was they believed in one God, Creator, Holy and wholly other, and yet, following Jesus' death and resurrection, in retrospect, his followers were convinced that this was truly God in their midst, living for a while among them. As they considered the possibility of God becoming one of them—entering their human experience and suffering as mentor and Savior—they were deeply touched and yet confused as to how this fit into their understanding of who God is. Was their devotion to Jesus a betrayal of Yahweh?

To compound the dilemma, they also believed that God was present with them still, literally inside of them in the Holy Spirit to remember, to empower and to sustain them in their daily lives.

Yes, to say that the early Christians were in a dilemma is quite accurate. Their choices were equally undesirable. Do they give up their faith tradition and the synagogue they knew and loved? Do they deny the experience of this one Jesus who transformed their lives and deepened their understanding of the love of God?

It is precisely because of the tenacity and incredible courage of these early believers of Christ that our understanding of who God is has been so enriched in the doctrine of the Trinity. They refused to deny their personal experience and encounter “face to face” with the grace of God in Jesus of Nazareth. Likewise, they refused to give up the heart of their Judaea tradition—namely that there is one God.

Out of this time of chaos and confusion was an opportunity for creativity. Even as wisdom and the spirit of God brought forth order out of chaos in the creating of the world, a new way of understanding God was being formed. When there seemed to be only two options, it was suddenly clear there was a third.

Why not embrace one God and at the same time celebrate the distinct ways God has been made known to them? Why limit God to one way of being… to one way of expressing Godself… to one way of loving God's people? Suddenly, a doctrine that was intended to assert the power of God, namely monotheism, became an obstacle to God's creative nature. God is defined by the relationship among the three persons, a relationship characterized by unity, equality, and distinction.

Sadly, the doctrine of the Trinity has lost the richness of its original intent in celebrating the dynamic of relationship. When we hear "Father, Son and Holy Spirit" we don't think about the relationship among these three, and yet this was precisely what the Early Christians thought. They celebrated the intimacy and partnership of these three persons. equal in power and glory. They marveled at the sacrifices each made for the other and the way in which they complemented one another to be the Triune God. Within the Godhead, there is a mutual respect and understanding of what each person contributes to the whole.

If the Holy Triune God lives within community and we reflect the image and glory of God, we, too, are called to live within community--complementing one another, making sacrifices for one another, treating one other with dignity and mutual respect, and affirming the unique gifts each person contributes to the whole.

This month an influential Old Testament scholar and father of our faith met his Maker, and the circle continues to be unbroken. The Rev. Dr. Walter Brueggeman died on June 5 at his home in Traverse City, Michigan, "God's country," surrounded by his family. I am among the students and the children whose faith have been "shaped and formed" by his thoughtful and prophetic writings, and I had the privilege of taking his class at Eden Theological Seminary in St. Louis when I was working on my Doctor of Ministry degree in pastoral counseling. Dr. Brueggeman's insight that the Psalms of Lament provide a path to healing and hope by expressing pain, grief, dismay, and anger honesty with God encouraged and shed light on my work as a therapist and experience within my own therapy.

As the Apostle Paul affirms in Romans 5, it is through losses, challenges, trials, and hurdles, that we become people of character and hope.

As we reflect on the unbroken and entwined circles of the Trinity, on our understanding of who God is and who God calls us to be, may we have the same courage and creativity as those who came before us and not limit God or ourselves. May we always celebrate the beauty and complexity of relationships, the pain and glory that are a part of life, and the wonder of a God who would join us in our humanity and live the unbroken circle of suffering, endurance, character, and the hope that will not disappoint us. Amen.