

SERMON: Three Doors to God

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Inevitably, there are moments in our lives when the walls are closing in.

It's last call, the lights flicker. We have to go home.

Face the music. Face the consequences of our actions.

Society teaches us that the human condition seems contingent on the foundation of our suffering.

Society doesn't tell us though- that's that when we find out who we truly are.

There is a perverse honesty that seems to happen the moment darkness hits our lives of light.

That seems to be the moment when our truest selves are exposed.

The second reading from John is Jesus preparing for his exposure.

We see a gentle Jesus, soft in vulnerability here in this passage- as he prays for the disciples.

This is the last passage before he goes across the Kidron valley where he is betrayed by Judas's kiss.

We don't know and can only postulate on what Christ really knows about his future.

He knows to some degree, of the agonizing days ahead, of the bleakness and abandonment he will experience.

Yet, even with his own divine knowing,

Christ chooses this moment to gift his disciples with prayer, blessing them that they may know the fullness of God before he is tried and murdered.

This deliberate action of Christ is yet another example of how the human part of him was capable of extraordinary kindness.

When we are at our worst in our lives, we are so desperate praying for our own relief- our margins are so thin, when we are suffering death by a thousand paper cuts of tiny hurts

Would it even cross our minds to place our prayers for others ahead of our own?

Especially knowing that the worst is still yet to come.

Jesus's death transmutes suffering into salvation in a form of holy alchemy.

When Jesus's walls were closing in- he turned himself into a door for us to find hope.

Typically, we think of Jesus either as a Man, or as Son of God... but rarely do we visualize Jesus Christ as a portal to God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, and vice versa...

What a freeing thought.

On that note: Two weeks ago I went to Tipitina's for the first time.

It's a concert hall on the corner of Tchoupitoulas and Napoleon, and they have these free concerts on Friday nights during the summer.

Have you ever been in a space and it's undeniable that there's something magical occurring?

I was there in Tipitinas,

a six-piece band was playing and I just danced the soles off my shoes.

Ever since the pandemic- every time I hear live music,

I don't take one second of it for granted.

It's similar to seeing you all in these seats,

coming to church post-pandemic-

Sacred holiness.

Our senses engaged. Touch, Smell, Hear, See, Tastes...

No computer screen can replace what it's like to be physically present somewhere.

At Tipitinas, I stood at that front line,

brass band blasting

and trumpet reverberating into my face, I was so happy.

I went alone and another woman was there alone,

and we both were just losing it on the dancefloor together but alone,

but not so alone

-child-like.

No words were needed, bonded by some unspeakable experience of music in sweaty dance hall.

In Celtic tradition,..... there's a sacred phrase called *anam cara*-.....

It means soul-friend.

For those 10 minutes at Tipitinas, dancing with abandon,

I danced and it was as if every step I took

rooted me back into this earth,

waking me up from spiritual slumber and self appointment numbness,

I felt closer to the Holy Spirit than I'd experienced in a long, long time.

***it felt like that concert hall was a door to God.***

God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit-

The Triune God encounters us when we are least expecting it and grabs ahold of our feet.

Mercifully tethering our bodies back to our ever-awakening souls.

Today's worship is designed with the intention of breaking into thirds the 3 parts of the Trinity

and celebrating the gifts of each arm,

but also recognizing that these 3 parts are in fact, portals or doorways to the other two-

intrinsically and holistically connected.

Which if you like fun new words: the word for what I just said is perichoresis.

The eternal dance of the Trinity opening up to each other-recklessly with abandon.

1. Our first hymn sung today, **I Believe in God the Father** introduces us to the Trinity,

placing emphasis on the balance of mercy and power that exists in God as a caring parental and creative figure.

2. Then we sang **What a Friend we Have in Jesus** as a reminder of the oft-forgotten kinship we have as humans with Jesus, son of Joseph and Mary.

3. Then at the end of worship today we will sing **Come Down, O Love Divine** which is a song written in the late 1400's as a vernacular Italian sacred song

which celebrated the Holy Spirit as it descended during Pentecost.

I challenge each of us to lovingly and critically self-examine where we stand in relationship with each part of the Trinity.

and imagine each part as vulnerable but unconquerable doors-

Doors that are strong, mysterious, opening up to the most tender parts of life-

yet doors that we cannot sway, manipulate, or choose to slam shut-

these are majestic doors that we hold zero power over,

we simply are given grace and opportunity and free will to choose to walk through them...

Loving the whole-ness of the triune God offers us the chance to see God completely differently than we ever did before.

It also helps us possibly understand how others who think VERY differently might see God...

It's very much like we might prefer the tune of one song we sang today more than the other—

And we may prefer certain parts of the trinity over others- without even realizing.

But, when we are only curious about one arm of the Triune God,

ignore the body as a whole,

our souls fall into holistic imbalance.

And the only way to rectify that imbalance,

is by engaging with the other parts of the Trinity.

I'm going to throw three theological terms at you for each of these doors and then explain more deeply about each. Bear with me for a second here.

**Door One: Paterocentric**

**Door Two: Christocentric**

**Door Three: Pneumacentric.**

For imaginations sake, pretend that each door opens up to your personal relationship with God and how you act out your faith outside of church.

*DOOR ONE: Some of us might feel more connected to ABBA, God the Father*

If you're someone who has always connected deeply to God as a parent and creative figure, maybe this will sound relatable.

When you're paterocentric, you really emphasize God as the parent figure as the central focus of faith and Christian identity.

The God of Park Rangers, ecologists, Emily Dickinson, John Muir and Henry David Theoreau...

So, what are the pros of this?

When we look at God as a loving parent figure, the constructor of our world and animator of our bodies, we become in touch again with our inner child.

We reclaim our innocence and purity.

We spy the art in nature, we walk with gratitude upon the soil,  
We celebrate nature and marvel at the grandeur of the atom.

God the Father, as we read often in our liturgy is this huge umbrella term of care and protection and nurturing guidance.

Seems great right?

It is!

However, there are some parts of God that we're missing out on knowing when we only know God the Father, and God our great creator.

But when we're only talking about God the Father, we can be a part of that death by a tiny papercuts I mentioned earlier because some people have really harmful and heartbreaking experiences at the hands of their parents or parental figures.

If someone's trying to have a relationship with God, but the only image of God they know echoes the face of sin- and has negative emotions attached to it—then they might not be able to understandably- relate or even want to relate to a God- the Father.

And perhaps you personally are not someone who thrives in nature, and prefers urbanization and human progress- then this may be a hard concept of God to grasp.

If we ONLY speak about God the Father in our faith tradition, and ignore the other arms of the trinity, we're isolating these folks potentially, and missing out on a richness in our faith community.

Perhaps its perfectly ok to re-imagine the archetype of God the parental figure to perhaps God as a strong, loving and encouraging mentor or teacher then if that is more healing to you.

Paterocentrism offers us a door to God that sees all and knows every fiber of our moral compasses, built our lungs from the clay of this Earth- and the trees to fill our planet with oxygen.

This is the God who wove the fabric of our lives to run in tandem with His Holy mysterious plans.

*Onto DOOR TWO – God the son- Jesus Christ.* Christocentrism.

Many Christian's are Christocentric.

For God the Son, we might find a bridge to our Christian siblings in more evangelical settings or backgrounds.

PROS OF THIS: Christ is the foundation and body of the church. We're Christ-ians after all.

Jesus embodies the friend in the Godhead. Remember the celtic term we talked about earlier- Anam Cara?

This door to God- is our anam cara.

Jesus is the blood and flesh and human imperfection tied together with the air and invisible grace that we yield and pray to each and every day.

with Jesus- we have something tangible, living, breathing.

Something that looks like us.

In Christ, the triune God tends the least among us, suffers the curse of human sinfulness, raises up a new humanity, and promises a new future for all creation.

Christ is symbolic of our salvation, and gives us hope for our future.

CONS OF ONLY BEING IN RELATIONSHIP WITH THIS:

But one concern is when we ONLY know God through His Son and ONLY studying a fragment of the bible.... we're missing out on a larger story that's shown in Scripture.

When you're only looking at God-Christocentrically, you might only study the Gospels and the New Testament and completely avoid the other 77 percent of our Scriptures in the Old Testament .

There are alot of Christian churches that are incredibly well versed in the Gospel and keep their entire curriculum and Sunday scripture choices to only reflect these passages and the story of Christ.

The Old Testament is part of our canon.

It is part of our story, and the books of the Old Testament- which is also called- the Hebrew Bible- builds a bridge between the Gospel, and the story of Jesus's ancestry and paternal human lineage.

It introduces us to a deeper relationship to the stories that Jesus would have grown up with in the Temple and reflects the culture of that time.

We celebrate the Son because Jesus is Christ is a symbol of each of our salvations,  
freely given by the Father, and revealed by the Spirit.

And if we can't get through the God the Son door, but so so so desperately want to- we can start with  
Jesus- the prophet door- and study the history and legacy of Jesus- first as a person... and then through  
that tiny little push in the door, perhaps the light and love of God the Son- may emerge.

**Let's start with Door Number Three, God the Holy Spirit: pnemacentric.**

Lastly, some Christians may identify as pneumacentric..

Our Book of Order says the Holy Spirit is "the giver and renewer of life" The Holy Spirit manifests God's  
gracious action and empowers our grateful response.

PROS OF THIS: I admit, I fall into this camp...heavily and like everyone else here- that's strictly through  
the personal experiences of my life.

Our relationship with the Triune God- seems to reflect the stories and traumas and miracles of our  
interactions with the world around us.

When you are really tied to, and in love with the Holy Spirit- well, things can get a little weird fast.

Many folks who are pnemacentric might feel uncomfortable at times with the structure of religion,  
they might lean more toward meditation and contemplative practices more than others-

When reading Scripture, they may hyperfocus and find relationship with the spirituality pieces,

they might love the esoteric pieces of scripture like the Witch of Endor in Samuel, or the dreams of  
Joseph, or the burning bush with Moses in Exodus or the conversion of Saul to Paul.

They might relate more to the healings, and find relationship with Christ as a healer first and foremost.

They might use the terms for God that are left open for interpretation- such as Pneuma, Spirit, Holiness,  
Light, Love... and even Universe- etc...

A downside to ONLY nurturing our connection with God the Spirit is that we forget to meet the other  
two persons of God- God the Father and God the Son.

When we only are in relationship with God the Spirit,

we miss out on the community aspects of our faith.

When we become too entrenched in ONLY celebrating the Spirit,

we risk separating from the Body of Christ- the church community which is designed to  
celebrate the many gifts of the spirit that we all can share with one another.

We're not designed to be lone wolves in our spiritual practices day in and day out.

God the spirit breathed new Pentecostal tongues into us and dispersed us, but God the Son reunited us in the Gospels.

Only knowing God through the Holy Spirit is like breathing without a body.

The body is what really rounds things out here.

We celebrate the Spirit because it offer us a door to God that is mysterious, healing, colorful, expressive and help us wake up and appreciate the mysteries of the Cosmos.

CONCLUSION:

What we really want is to be all equally yoked in all three of these paradigms, these three faces of God and to set aside our theological entrenchments in what it is we think that we know when we think of God.

And when we do that, then ..

We're truly Theocentric.

This matters...

A relationship with the Trinity enriches our lives and gives us a larger framework for conversations with members from other Christian denominations and members of other religions because we can usually identify a common similarity that they are deeply attached to.

So here's the thing. And if you remember nothing else from today- please remember what I am about to say:

What happens if you're listening to this and can't relate to anything said today, or said really recently and you're experiencing a bit of a crisis of faith

You can't remember the last time you felt ANY connection to divine Love,

You feel numb.

Perhaps you're here because it's what's expected of you,

or perhaps you're here because you are hoping that maybe there will be some holy experience that will catapult your spirit right back on track...

And the idea of relating to God is something you simply are not able to do today.

Can we normalize how human that is by the way?

Maybe you're in your own walls-closing-in experience...

And you're feeling a bit claustrophobic of the life you've found yourself living in?



How did we even get here to these points, it happened so quickly... why did no one warn me!

I am right there with you, in these trenches-

We must find the tools (removed from sin) you have in your toolkit- that give you peace and comfort.

That is where we start.

When we cannot find a door or any connection to God no matter how hard we look,  
then the first step is to prioritize our spiritual and physical healings.

As we do that, slowly, our connectivity to God recovers.

So, nourish those tools,

those balms of gilead,

those sacred moments-

whatever they are, and hold tight to them like life rafts.

Perhaps they are your times of prayer in the morning before school, or perhaps time in your garden,  
perhaps they are your therapy sessions, your moments of exercise, your painting, your carpentry, your  
cooking, your volunteering in your community, your acts of creating beauty in the world..

Perhaps it is simply journaling, or writing down the moments in your life that shaped and molded you,  
that got you to where you are.

Or spending time with long-lost friends.

The waters calm eventually,

and the connection to God restores with time.

That divine and holy relationship is allowed to ebb and flow,

and change and morph.

We don't have to be esoteric Tipitinas ecstasy or be in 24/7 anam cara with Christ,

or feeling the paternal consternation and guidance of a parental God every day.

There is just as much sacred beauty in practicing our faith as there is in loving ourselves in the absence of  
it.

Let us instead be curious-

we might discover that we are surrounded by doors to God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost.

But they looked quite different than we were told they should look.

We can use these doors or we can discard them,

Each person's pathway to God is sacred and their own,

Each person's suffering is an opportunity for us, as the Body- to extend and reflect back upon those in pain- deep love and acceptance.

and it is not for us to cast judgment for what each other's relationship to the Triune God may be.

Like doctor's prescribing medications to sick patients,

when we cannot find our true and authentic connections to the divine,

then we too are in need of some sort of spiritual re-calibration.

But no one in the entire world, no human- can tell you what that is.

Because, your spiritual journey is yours.

And if you don't know where to start,

begin with identifying the pieces of your life that fall incongruent with your heart- those are areas where sin seem to creep in more often than not/ separating us from the divine.

- and work, in your own ways, on healing these areas and as your mind, and body and spirit heal, so will these divine dancing doors become visible again once more.

And you'll realize they were never far from you ever at all.

They, were dancing in and out of every facet of your bodies cells,

your heart's journey,

They were present in the friends who checked in on you, who told you they loved you, who forgave you, who you forgave,

They were dancing with you, in the early morning feedings.

They were dancing with you In the late night arguments after the children went to bed.

They were dancing with you, begging you to open them,

To peer inside

To cross the threshold

When you were crying over late payments,

When you dropped your last daughter off at college,

When you couldn't decide which route to go with your oncology treatments

When you found out your parent was dying,

Or when you were new to New Orleans,

dancing alone at Tipitinas.

There is a beautiful Trinitarian motif from Celtic spirituality that says,

The Sacred Three

My fortress be

Encircling me

Come and be round

My hearth and my home.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.