

**Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa  
Sunday, June 16, 2019 – Elizabeth Bryce**

**Readings: Proverbs 8:1-4  
John 16:12-15**

**Sermon: Sacred Three (Trinity Sunday)**

Last Sunday I was attending the Celebration of Ministries service of our new Eastern Ontario Outaouais Regional Council. That's a lot of words that probably don't mean much to you.

Eastern Ontario Outaouais Regional council, we call it EOOD for short, EOOD is the new regional body that we are part of. In the restructuring of the United Church of Canada, it replaces two tiers of decision-making: we used to belong to Ottawa Presbytery **and** Montreal and Ottawa Conference. This has been a geographical shift for us –we were once more Quebec, but now we have moved west and north as a region, so we are more Ontario. It has also meant a numerical shift for our meetings. Because the region is much bigger than our former Presbytery, it covers much of the same workload – which means a lot more voices brought to every discussion. (So, that's a lot of fun!) But we meet less often.

So now we are EOOD. Made up of four founding Presbyteries, from two very different conferences. We have a mixture of former staff and new staff. We have a bunch of old traditions and former expectations, but we also have new hopes and dreams of innovation, all stirred up together by the Holy spirit of Pentecost.

The former conference had 1 responsibility that had to be met annually. That was the celebration of all the new ministers – the ordinations, commissionings, the designation of trained lay ministers, the admission of ministers from other denominations, and the installation of a new Executive.

In years past when conferences chose not to meet, either because of a lack of business or funds, they still had to do this one service. The last couple of years our Conference chose to do their business meeting electronically – but we still had a celebration of ministries service to mark these important transitions.

So last Sunday I found myself at Trinity United Church in Smiths Falls, celebrating the inauguration of these new ministry folk into their vocation of pastoral ministry. As I walked in the door, I was handed a bulletin. It looked exactly like the bulletin I received one year ago at Montreal and Ottawa's celebration of ministry service. The service is put together by the Executive minister, and her associate, and she was from M&O, so it didn't change much. She was in control, right?

Then I was invited to join the choir. The choir were mostly from Trinity United, along with their music director, with just a few of us Regional reps. And it was pretty clear from the choir loft that they thought they were in control. I know well enough not to argue with a choir.

But then most of the people speaking, the preacher and the outgoing and the incoming President and most of the congregation, I think, were from Bay of Quinte. So when the bulletin said sing Halle, hallelujah once, and the organist told the choir to sing it once, the congregation hijacked it with a lot of speeding up and hand-clapping and we sang it multiple times.

We were these three different threads, these three traditions coming together – and the result was one joyful noise.

And it WAS joyful! A lot of our Ottawa-urban cynicism was brushed away by that joy. Smaller Presbyteries, who are used to making do with very little in the way of resources, they were happy to find that there actually were funds and volunteers available to do something new. And even the choir thought having a congregation that loved to sing so much was pretty special.

I thought to myself: this is my image of the Trinity this year – this joyful noise, this happy confusion, this unexpected ending. When each one of us let go of our control a little, we found that the space between us led us into something holy and inspired, both new and old at the same time.

One of the students at my college 3 decades ago came from Lesotho, of the Basotho culture. She told us that she understood Trinitarian theology to be like the 3 legged pot found in most Basotho kitchens. For her, the tri-pot represented the life of God's people: it represents women, men and children working together. If one group or leg is abused or gets bent from too much pressure, the whole pot, that symbol of the community cannot stand. Likewise the three legs might represent 3 aspects of Jesus' ministry: *kerygma* – the message; *koinonia* – the community; and *diakonia* – service in the world.

And for us today, the tri-pot represents the Holy Trinity – an ancient Christian formula that attempted to explain the relationship between God the Creator, Jesus the Christ and the Holy Spirit. Different faces of God, different entry points into knowing God, different aspects of God, but still one essential unity.

The number three is a little problematic – not the number three itself, but that it is a finite number – and therefore it is so easy to get rigidly fundamentalist about that finite number. To insist that there is absolutely no more and no less than three, no other way to understand God. But who are we to limit God?

One of my favourite quotes from John Dominic Crossan, a famous biblical scholar is this: *My point, once again, is not that those ancient people told literal stories and we are now smart enough to take them symbolically, but that they told them symbolically and we are now dumb enough to take them literally.*

You might notice in our scripture readings today that even one Holy Spirit could essentially be two, at least in people's diverse interpretation of the scripture passages that refer to the Spirit. In Proverbs 8 – Sophia or the spirit of wisdom is very clearly a **she**. In John 16, the spirit is **he**, because the Greek word *pneuma* is a masculine word. Therefore all the articles are masculine and the Spirit is imaged as male. I find it hard to believe that God or Christ or Spirit is only one half of a binary system, a system which

only just begins to scratch the surface of something as diverse as gender, not to mention God.

These are the kinds of word pictures that we create to tell our faith story: we try to capture our experience of God in words – but words can only take us so far. We try to tell stories or parables that communicate the experience of something holy – and sometimes those stories get interpreted as science or history or doctrine.

The Trinity is one of those ancient formulas that helped the early church communicate what they believed to be the **relationship** or connection between the many and diverse experiences that opened their hearts to the holy:

The experience of God, Christ and Spirit, is at work in the world always and forever – but could never be limited to a finite understanding of the three.

And yet three is relational. As an artist said: when you have three, there is always foreground and background. As a psychotherapist said: when you have three one is always on the way in or out of the conversation. As the theologian said: where there is three, there is always something unexpected coming your way. And as the Basotho tri-pot tells us: where there is three, there is balance so that we can stand together.

*God almighty, creator of heaven and earth;  
Reveal your growing kingdom in our midst: Amen.  
Jesus, Christ child of the living God;  
Show us your mercy and your delight: Amen.  
Holy Spirit, breath of the living God;  
Renew me and all the world:  
Amen and Alleluia!*