

Year C, Trinity Sunday

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Thomas L. Truby

John 16:12-15 (The Common English Bible, copyright 2011)

The Three Musketeers

When I was a kid I remember going to a farm south of town with my parents and spending the afternoon with a boy and his male cousin both a year older than me. It was a lonely day because they spent it excluding me. I felt miserable, out of place, rejected and wondered why when there were three people, I got shoved out. That happened to me more than once and I grew to hate threesomes. They often devolved into two against one and I would be the one. Not fun!

I also remember “The Three Musketeers.” That’s the name two friends and I gave ourselves during our 7th and 8th grade years. We were all regular attenders at Randolph Methodist Church and our parents went to the “Crusaders” group affording us an opportunity to explore while they met. We discovered a sub-basement in the church that we thought no one knew about and a live shell that we put into a vice and considered detonating with a hammer and punch. In spite of all our adventures we were not a perfect threesome where we each were for the others, putting the other first, and wanting the best for all.

I was keenly aware of being able to put one of my two friends into a scissors-hold and win a wrestling match any time we wrestled. I was quicker and stronger than he. Our other friend even less agile wouldn’t engage me in combat. Needless to say the Three Musketeers had the seed of its own destruction built into it. It dissolved totally by the time we were in the 9th grade and in high school together. Could my rivalry with the other two be part of its demise?

This is Trinity Sunday, the Sunday we reflect on God as a threesome only this threesome works and appears quite stable, unlike the Three Musketeers. How do they do that? Threesomes are so problematic but here is a threesome that provides a model for all human relating.

In John's gospel Jesus says, "I have much more to say to you, but you can't handle it now." I wonder what they couldn't handle. Maybe they couldn't bear to hear the way we attempt to maintain tricky relationships by dividing two against one and sacrificing the one. Soon that would be happening with Jesus since the gospel text is located just before the crucifixion. Now we know they all leave Jesus who dies alone and friendless, the one out.

Jesus knew it was coming and had to be, if humans were to see what they do to each other. This is hard stuff rooted in human behavior and in no way philosophical or abstract! This is real and lived out day to day in the suffering of flesh and bone. It's built into our culture and all cultures and so close we can't see it. We wouldn't have seen it yet except Jesus allowed it to play out on his body and we wouldn't have noticed it then, since we do it so habitually, had it not been for God raising him on the third day.

But maybe it becomes possible to see after the Spirit comes, when the third member to the Trinity arrives and points to the unity between Jesus and God and shares in that unity. What the Spirit points to is certainly different from my relations with my adolescent friends who were actually chief rivals. Even among the Three Musketeers I would shame the one friend by beating him in wrestling while the other friend looked on with what I assumed was admiration. I had sacrificed one friend to gain the admiration of the other. It's taken me more than 50 years to see how I contributed to the destruction of that group. It's easy to see where I was the one sacrificed; but not so easy to see where I did the sacrificing. The move I made with my "friends" is such a common thing and can be done a thousand ways.

Could this be what Jesus meant when he said, "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth." Maybe my culpability is the rest of the story. We need guidance to see the truth about ourselves and how God is different from us. We needed the Spirit to show us the unity between the Father and Son before we could see the lack of unity between us. Maybe God forgives and includes but we condemn and attempt to establish dominance over each other.

With the Spirit's coming, the Spirit that points to the unity of the Father and the Son, we have a model for how to live without rivalry. The Spirit guides us into all the truth for the Spirit does

not speak on his own but says whatever he hears as he listens to the Father and the Son. If the Spirit had been listening to what was really going on among the Three Musketeers we would all be exposed as narcissists.

Do you see the unity at work in Jesus' description of the Godhead and how it contrasts with most human relationships? In the Trinity we have three persons relating and they are all in perfect harmony. There is no two against one but three together and each for the other. How do they do that? What is their secret?

Whatever their secret, it points to things that are to come. This is the way the world was meant to work and there will come a time when it works that way again, that's what Jesus is saying in this passage from John's gospel. This is the thing the Spirit proclaims to us. There will come a point when we can work together for the good of all.

Jesus entered the world to begin a process that will culminate in the arrival of this new way of living. He called it the Kingdom. It's just a matter of time and we have the opportunity to get in on it before it arrives in its fullness. That's Jesus' message in all four gospels. We don't know how this is going to happen but Jesus says it is. It's what gives us hope no matter how dark things may appear.

Jesus in speaking about the Spirit says, "He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you." The third member to the Trinity enhances the reputation of Jesus by taking what Jesus has said and announcing it to us. The Spirit doesn't twist things to bring glory to the Spirit. No, it always points back to Jesus. There is no distortion out of envy in what the Spirit tells us. Jesus also said, "Everything that the Father has is mine." They share everything. Their unity is complete and unbroken and the Spirit works with us to help us see it. We need the Spirit's help because this threesome is so different from most of the threesomes we know we have trouble imagining it.

I want to conclude by reading an excerpt from the book [Just Mercy](#) by Bryan Stevenson. Stevenson, a lawyer in Alabama, founded and directs The Equal Justice Initiative. You may have

heard him interviewed last week on the PBS Newshour. In this excerpt he writes about a threesome very different than the Three Musketeers.

I had the privilege of meeting Rosa Parks when I first moved to Montgomery. She would occasionally come back to Montgomery from Detroit, where she lived, to visit dear friends. Johnnie Carr was one of those friends. Ms. Carr had befriended me, and I quickly learned that she was a force of nature—charismatic, powerful, and inspiring. She had been, in many ways, the true architect of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. She had organized people and transportation during the boycott and done a lot of heavy lifting to make it the first successful major action of the modern Civil Rights Movement, and she succeeded Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as the president of the Montgomery Improvement Association. She was in her late seventies when I first met her. “Now Bryan, I’m going to call you from time to time and I’m going to ask you to do this or that and when I ask you to do something you’re going to say ‘Yes, ma’am,’ okay?”

I chuckled—and I said, “Yes, ma’am.” She would sometimes call just to check in on me, and on occasion she would invite me over when Ms. Parks came to town.

“Bryan, Rosa Parks is coming to town, and we’re going to meet over at Virginia Durr’s house to talk. Do you want to come over and listen?”

When Ms. Carr called me, she either wanted me to go some place to “speak” or to go some place to “listen.” Whenever Ms. Parks came to town, I’d be invited to listen.

“Oh, yes, ma’am. I’d love to come over and listen,” I’d always say, affirming that I understood what to do when I arrived.

Ms. Parks and Ms. Carr would meet at Virginia Durr’s home. Ms. Durr was also a larger-than-life personality. Her husband, Clifford Durr, was an attorney who had represented Dr. King throughout his time in Montgomery. Ms. Durr was determined to confront injustice well into her nineties. She frequently asked me to accompany her to various places or invited me over to dinner. EJI started renting her home for our law students and staff during the summers when she was away.

When I would go over to Ms. Durr’s home to listen to these three formidable women, Rosa Parks was always very kind and generous with me. Years later, I would occasionally meet her at events in other states, and I ended up spending a little time with her. But mostly, I just loved hearing her and Ms. Carr and Ms. Durr talk. They would talk and talk and talk. Laughing, telling stories, and bearing witness about what could be done when people stood up (or sat down, in

Ms. Parks' case). They were always so spirited together. Even after all they'd done, their focus was always on what they still planned to do for civil rights.

The first time I met Ms. Parks, I sat on Ms. Durr's front porch in Old Cloverdale, a residential neighborhood in Montgomery, and I listened to the three women talk for two hours. Finally, after watching me listen for all that time, Ms. Parks turned to me and sweetly asked, "Now, Bryan, tell me who you are and what you're doing." I looked at Ms. Carr to see if I had permission to speak, and she smiled and nodded at me. I then gave Ms. Parks my rap.

"Yes, Ma'am. Well, I have a law project called the Equal Justice Initiative, and we're trying to help people on death row. We're trying to stop the death penalty, actually. We're trying to do something about prison conditions and excessive punishment. We want to free people who've been wrongly convicted. We want to end unfair sentences to criminal cases and stop racial bias in criminal justice. We're trying to help the poor and do something about indigent defense and the fact that people don't get the legal help they need. We're trying to help people who are mentally ill. We're trying to stop them from putting children in adult jails and prisons. We're trying to do something about poverty and hopelessness that dominates poor communities. We want to see more diversity in decision-making roles in the justice system. We're trying to educate people about racial history and the need for racial justice. We're trying to confront abuse of power by police and prosecutors—"I realized that I had gone on way too long, and I stopped abruptly. Ms. Parks, Ms. Carr, and Ms. Durr were all looking at me.

Ms. Parks leaned back, smiling. "Ooooh honey, all that's going to make you tired, tired, tired." We all laughed. I looked down, a little embarrassed. Then Ms. Carr leaned forward and put her finger in my face and talked to me just like my grandmother used to talk to me. She said, "That's why you have to be brave, brave, brave." All three women nodded in silent agreement and for just a little while they made me feel like a young prince.

Now, to me, that's a description of the Trinity and how they work in complete harmony. They all three are in unity and for us just as these women were for civil rights. The Trinity is our model for relating.