

June 12, 2022

# *Trinity Sunday*

The Rev. Garrett Yates  
St. Anne's in-the-Fields Episcopal Church



A little bit of a different sermon this morning, as I want to allow a non-Christian, the ecologist and Native American spiritualist, Robin Wall Kimmerer, to lead us in thinking about the Trinity. There is a passage in her book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, describing why she loves the wilderness that might frame things nicely:

*I come here to listen, to nestle in the curve of the roots in a soft hollow of pine needles, to lean my bones against the column of white pine, to turn off the voice in my head until I can hear the voices outside it: the shhh of wind in needles, water trickling over rock, nuthatch tapping, chipmunks digging, beech nut falling, mosquito in my ear, and something more – something that is not me, for which we have no language, the wordless being of others in which we are never alone. After the drumbeat of my mother’s heart, this is my first language.*

Kimmerer is a trained scientist and professor – she teaches Environmental Biology in New York, and she is also the founder and director of the Center for Native Peoples and the Environment. While she is a scientist by training, her spiritual and ancestral roots are older, more native to her identity. Her love of the natural world begins not in rational investigation but in a humbler place, in a posture of listening. *Listening in wild places*, (she writes) *we are audience to conversations in languages not our own.*

Dr. Kimmerer strains to listen to the resonances of the wild; to succeed, she has to suspend her rational, scientific mind to hear a deeper language. It seems like an appropriate posture for us, too, as we enter into the vast and strange world of God we call Trinity. This is the Sunday when we have to quiet our words, our selves, the voices inside our heads, to see if we can hear the deeper language that God speaks.

What I find so interesting in her is her ability to keep two conversations alive: the rational world of science, and the mysterious world of faith. In *Braiding Sweetgrass*, she’s really calling out the overreach, the idolization even, of the Western scientific mindset. Kimmerer is in search of another language, a language more native, closer to the earth – a language that doesn’t describe and categorize but evokes wonder and mystery. Kimmerer’s chapter called “Learning the Grammar of Animacy” is her exploration of the endangered language of Potawatomi. One of the reasons this language is so endangered is due to its sheer difficulty to learn. Potawatomi is very different from English. English, Kimmerer points out, is a noun-heavy language; the majority of our words, 70%, are nouns, only 30% are verbs; of course, we love nouns since the materialistic West is so taken with the abstract noun of ownership. Potawatomi, on the other hand, is the opposite: it’s a verby language. It’s more active, more alive.

Kimmerer talks about taking language classes and learning from

the elders this ancient tongue. And she talks about the moment when it dawned on her how much our language affects how we appreciate the world. She learns the word *bay*, like the body of water, and in the native language it is a verb not a noun. She said, a bay is a noun only if water is dead, a lifeless object. When *bay* is a noun, it's defined by humans trapped between its shores and contained by the word. But the verb *wiikwegamaa* – to be a bay – releases the water from bondage and lets it live. To be a bay holds the wonder that, for this moment, the living water has decided to shelter itself between these shores, conversing with cedar roots and a flock of baby mergansers. Because it could do otherwise – become a stream or an ocean or a waterfall, there are verbs for that too. Saturday, a noun for us, in Potowanami is a verb – “time is being Saturday.” A tree, isn't a thing – it is matter literally “treeing.”

When we say God is Trinity – that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – we are saying that God *is Trinitying*. God is an active presence and life. The word God isn't a noun; calling God Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is not to ascribe to God three proper nouns for three distinct individual subjects; it's not, as it's sometimes rather crassly put, there to suggest that God is “two guys and a bird.” No, it's language gesturing toward the dynamic relationality and living intimacy of the divine life.

Kimmerer is hard on Christianity, as she has every right to be. She recalls the missionaries sent to the Native people like her ancestors who were there to teach them English, the language of the King James Bible, to make them Christians, missionaries there to force them to forget their native tongue. They needed to learn that the world wasn't alive. Never mind what St. Francis said when he spoke of Brother Sun and Sister Moon; no, the world is just stuff. Just full of things. Nouns. Objects. A tree is just there to be chopped down. The bay isn't a verb; it's there for us humans to cross with engine and fuel.

We could translate what the Bible is trying to say about sin to the human tendency to turn what God created as verb, into what we can master and reduce to our Noun. Growing in Faith isn't too much different from Kimmerer teaching herself Potawatomi – both are endeavors at learning the grammar of animacy. This God of animacy is not an object to managed, to be bought off by our good behavior, to be manipulated or domesticated. The last thing one can do is equate this God of Animacy as we so often do with wealth, health and happiness – the Holy One of Israel is not synonymous with the noun success. Nor is God merely an interesting topic of study or something interesting we choose to care about now and again, a thing we get to choose to believe in or not, an object of scientific investigation; the God of the Bible, the God of the Trinity is sheer subject, the Consuming Presence. We don't get to decide if this God exists, this God decides that we exist.

When we say that God is Trinity, we say that Reality, at its core, is alive, is dynamic. God isn't a thing; but a movement, a relationship, a verb – creative, redemptive, life-giving. We say more than that too. If Reality is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – we say that all that is is related, belongs in one family together, belonging like a parent and a child, like siblings – in the old language, like a Son to a Father, and their mutually overflowing love that we call Spirit. Love is the word we don't have a word for. Love isn't an object. As those Brits sang, you can't buy me love. It's freely bestowed.

We live in an objectifying world – people who don't look like us are objects of scorn; people who don't talk like us are objects of distrust; people who are attractive are so often objects of lust; people who aren't are objects of neglect....and on and on and on, down to the object-laden world itself.

And we come to church this Trinity Sunday much for the same reason Robin Wall Kimmerer goes into the woods:

*Sitting with back against ancient, and hewn wood; here in a sacred space older than all of us; breathing the air of our ancestors and the saints who have gone before; here bathed in an eternal light; lifted up by sound of hymn and prayer and worship, maybe we come to church to learn this other language.*

And today we have the great gift of baptizing young Otis Ballou. This baptismal water we'll pour over young Otis isn't dead water; it's living water. This water cleanses you, lifts you out of the objectifying world, and places you in a world of gift and mystery. This water invites you into another way of being, to see the world as sacred, to see your own life as sacred and precious. This water signifies God's blessing on you, and your family. And I hope you'll join us in learning this language of love, that word there is no word for.

We know this experience. Just yesterday as my dad was leaving after a visit, he gave me a hug, and said, "Love ya son; I'm proud of you." Such simple everyday experiences where we taste the trinity. The tenderness of touch; the sound of our names on our children's lips. The peaceful and contented silence we share with our spouse. Holding our aging parent's hands. The Trinity is the very life in which our life unfolds.

And baptism is an invitation into a new language, growing into the life of the Trinity, One God in Three Persons.

When we call God Father, Son, and Spirit we aren't saying we have words to explain the mystery of the world; these are words to evoke its mystery. These three Names remind us that God's life is like a beautiful and resonant sound calling out to us: three notes comprising one chord, the sound of love drawing us into fuller life.