

Sunday - July 5, 2009  
Pastor - Rev. Paula P. Werner  
Sermon - **The Shack – Part 1, The Trinity**

**Announcements:** Today's sermon is the first in a 3 part series based on key issues which are dealt with in a best selling book by Paul Young, called The Shack. If you haven't read the book, hopefully my message will still make sense and cause you to think more deeply to turn to your Bible – and maybe read the Shack as well. If you have read the Shack, and I'm hopeful that the Sunday sermons will prod you in your thinking.

The Shack is a good vehicle to use to delve more deeply into some of the most basic questions most humans have. This morning we'll think about Who is God: the trinity, this circle of love. Next Sunday, we'll consider the question that plagues so many --- if God is so good, then why are things so bad, or put another way, Why is there evil? Why doesn't a good God do something about it? Then the third sermon will address the work of Jesus in forgiveness.

Author Paul Young wrote the Shack for his children, to satisfy the request of his wife, Kim, to explain how he thought because it was so out of the box. Kim had envisaged a statement of 4-6 pages. This manuscript was originally made into 15 copies, spiral bound, plastic cover at Office Depot. But it kept getting handed to more and more friends and more and more copies needed to be made. Paul had to form his own publishing company, because 26 publishers turned him down – no one wanted to publish it. He and his buddy shipped 1 million books out of their garage and then the book took on a life of its own. It went straight to #1 on the NY Times best seller list and remained there 49 weeks straight. It has sold 7 million copies in English, is printed in 14 languages.

It has changed lives. It has pointed people to God. Remember The Shack is ABOUT God's word and is not God's word. It's an excellent fiction account helping us to understand the Trinity, evil, forgiveness and faith a bit better. The Shack communicates great truths about God that are both biblical and resonate with experience. You can quibble with some individual statements and I can agree that if you take some thoughts to the extreme, then major issues might become problematic. But I prefer to deal with the positive, helpful way this book helps us in our God-quest. Anything which makes this more assessable is welcome.

**Sermon** “May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be formed by your grace, for you are our Lord, our rock, and our redeemer. We're going to be thinking this morning about the nature of God. Many people think of God as a God of love. Others think of God as a God of wrath and judgment. Let's try some participation in this. Raise your hands if your primary view of God is as a God of wrath.... God of love..... now, how many of you think both?

Every time I've taught confirmation, I've given out a paper which lists many of the names and attributes and noun titles for God, together with the scripture reference. There's a reason for that. I'm trying to open up our concepts

of God – to expand our thinking. We all tend to keep God in a little box --- we define God so as we can best understand God and think that is God.

Yet, have you ever considered how a finite people, like you and me, could describe an infinite God? Not possible. So what we do is attempt to find examples and analogies, similes and metaphors which will aid in our comprehension. The Biblical writers did this. Straight from the Bible come these words referring to God: fortress, alpha and omega, deliverer, fountain of life, king, daddy, mother, power, stronghold. And these images: God as a woman looking for a lost coin, God as an absentee landlord who sends his son to check on the tenants, God as a shepherd looking for a lost lamb, God as a father welcoming back his prodigal son – and that most familiar one from Psalm 23: “The Lord is my shepherd.”

Our image of God and the way we might well feel and relate is very different using the word, rock ---- God is my rock and refuge, or God gathers us like a hen gathers her chick under her wings. God as shepherd seeking after the lost is a very different image from God as warrior or flowing fountain. Yet, every image helps to contribute to our understanding of God. We still fall short.

I do imagine that the vast majority of people could accept that the two most prevalent images of God we’ve been taught or absorbed over the years is God as a sweet, grandfatherly figure or God as a harsh punitive judge. These two images are just that --- images that other writers have come up with to help finite people begin to comprehend an infinite god who cannot be comprehended.

The fiction book, The Shack can help in thinking about God, evil, forgiveness. Please don’t think that this is the be-all, end-all book ---- it’s just a fictional story. But because it’s so well written and comes so from the heart and from the depth of emotional experience, it helps us think in deeper and broader ways about God and the Trinity. It is a springboard inviting us into deeper reflection. One thing is for sure, there are very few of us who would pick up either of these two books: (cite my 2 theology texts) They are what is referred to as systematic theology. Systematic theology is methodical, orderly, organized, or logical way of understanding religion or God talk. No one has ever asked to borrow either of these books from me. The Shack also presents theology – or God talk in a way that’s easier to read and understand. That’s because the theology comes in a story. Jesus knew this concept. Jesus only occasionally lectured; instead, he told stories. Stories are easier to remember, to understand and to place oneself inside or alongside of.

Who among you have read The Shack? Let me summarize the story. Mackenzie Philips is the central character – called Mack. While Mack’s wife is away he takes his 3 children on a camping trip in Oregon. While Mack runs to rescue two of his kids from a canoe mishap on the lake, his youngest daughter, Missy, is kidnapped and then murdered. Eventually, evidence of her death is found in an abandoned shack in the mountains. Four years later Mack receives a note from someone called “Papa” – the word his wife uses for God, inviting Mack to meet at the shack. Mack decides to visit the shack to see if he can find any resolution to his pain – which he refers to as The Great Sadness. He goes without telling his wife what he is doing. As he approaches the shack he’s afraid that he might encounter his daughter’s killer but instead he encounters

God in a very human way. The Father, Son and Spirit all appear in the form of people. The Father appears, as a big black woman with an unusual sense of humor. The Holy Spirit appears as an Asian woman named Sarayu (pronounced sa rah yoo') and Jesus appears as a Middle Eastern laborer in blue jeans and a flannel shirt. The rest of the book records the conversation that Mack has with the Trinity of God.

When Mack first meets the Trinity – they are portrayed as God = papa=Elousia (El – a name from Hebrew times meaning Creator God, and ousia is “being” or “that which is truly real”, so the name means the Creator God who is truly real and the ground of all being. Mack questions his own sanity saying, “Am I going crazy? Am I supposed to believe that God is a big black woman with a questionable sense of humor?” Now for those of you who are stiffening in your chairs right now, thinking, “whoa, I can’t think of God like that.” I certainly empathize. In fact, when I first picked up this book—reading it only because it had been recommended by several of you and left on my desk with the encouragement to read, I was caught up in the story of Mack and his children and the death of Missy. I was pained by that. But introducing God as a big black woman made me put the book down for a while to sit and assess my feelings—not because of assigning a different gender to God than we normally do, nor of assigning a different color to God than we normally do, but because I have such strict ideas about propriety and seemly behavior and speech that this casual way of interaction with God and the trinity seemed too familiar and inappropriate for me. I had to do a bit of self-assessment, asking myself, “Paula, why is this a problem? What are you learning about God and about yourself?” Good questions for us all as we read. So, even though initially the concept made me uncomfortable, I found that the mental exercise and probing that I was entering into were well worth it.

If you haven’t paused and thought deeply about your understanding of the Trinity, today is as good a day as any to begin that. We can identify who God is on the basis of God’s own self disclosure – we know this through God’s covenant with Israel – as recorded in the story of this covenant in the Bible, and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God is thus a revealed mystery, an open secret that becomes revealed to us, yet is inexhaustible. That’s one reason we need to read the Bible; it is God’s story.

Papa says to Mack, “I’m not who you think I am (p. 96 TS). By nature I am completely unlimited, without bounds.” P. 98 TS That should not strike us as new, for we have often read in the book of Isaiah the prophet in the O.T. (55:8) “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.” Mack’s Papa continues, “I am neither male nor female, even though both genders are derived from my nature. If I chose to appear to you as a man or a woman, it’s because I love you. For me to appear to you as a woman and suggest you call me Papa is simply to mix metaphors, to help you keep from falling so easily back into your religious conditioning. To reveal myself to you as a very large, white grandfather figure with flowing beard, like Gandalf (from Lord of the Rings) would simply reinforce your religious stereotypes...” p. 93TS

Mack has trouble with this. “He believed, in his head, at least, that God was a Spirit, neither male nor female, but in spite of that, he was embarrassed to admit to himself that all his visuals of God were very white and very male.” P. 93

Next, in the book, Jesus appears, and frankly, this Jesus was the least difficult part of the Trinity to relate to in the book --- and that’s likely true for most of us relating to the Jesus of the Bible. We understand a human being and Jesus is fully human. Our Biblical Jesus deals with the hurts, betrayals, disappointments, happiness and joys, with friends, family and work colleagues, government and religious structures just as you and I do now. Yet, Jesus is also fully divine. Jesus is fully God. We typically have such a hard time trying to grasp a concept of God that Jesus is one of our more assessable ways of understanding. The best understanding we have of God is looking at Jesus, for he said, “I and my father are one.” (John 10:30) The Jesus of The Shack and the Jesus of The Bible are each a Jesus we can relate to. Mack is told, “the Truth shall set you free and the Truth has a name; he’s over in the woodshop right now covered in sawdust. Everything is about HIM. And freedom is a process that happens inside a relationship with him.” Jesus is portrayed as truth and is part of this relationship. Mack finds Jesus the easiest way to know God.

The third part of the Trinity is the Holy Spirit; that has been always the hardest for most of us to get our minds wrapped around. In Hebrew and Greek, the languages of the Bible, the words for spirit, wind, and breath are nearly the same, and help form our concept of God’s present activity in our midst. The Holy Spirit is God with us always, as a giver of gifts and understanding, and as a transformer, converter of life, as a revealer of divine truth, as God which moves in the hearts and consciences of all. The Holy Spirit was promised by Jesus in the gospel of John, was sent by Jesus and is our guide to the truth. In The Shack, the name Sarayu is given to the Holy Spirit. It is a Hindi word meaning “wind that surprises”. Sarayu is imaged as an Asian woman and defined as creativity, action, the Breathing of life, God’s spirit.

Father, son, spirit in the Bible or Papa, Jesus, Sarayu in The Shack --- the trinity. The Bible never uses the word Trinity, yet throughout the Old and New Testaments, God is experienced in triune ways. The story of the beginning of creation, from the book of Genesis 1:1 says: In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. “ (here we have the account of God the creator and God the Holy Spirit) The gospel of John says: 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. (Here we have an account of God the Creator and the Son, Jesus, who brought divine life into the world)

Over several centuries, the church formulated an explicit doctrine of the Trinity. The Council of Nicea (AD 325) and Constantinople (AD 381) taught that God is “one in essence, distinguished in three persons.” The words are a bit strange to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> cent, but the intent is to describe the reality of the living God in conformity with the gospel story. P. 62 Migliore In most of our worship services, we repeat in unison either the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed, each are ancient statements of faith – written to repudiate false teachings in the

early church. Written and said so that the church had a unified, cohesive belief which it was teaching, preaching and living by. We say those creeds today in recognition of these shared beliefs over the centuries. We believe in the trinity, as stated in these creeds.

In *The Shack*, the Trinity is the same, just written to make it a bit easier to understand than an ancient creed or a theology book. The trinity is about relationship. I had someone say to me recently that they had always pictured God as being first and most important, then came Jesus, then the Holy Spirit. That may be your thinking, but it's not Biblical --- we all pick up ideas and often get them skewed. It's understandable. We think hierarchically because you and I live in a hierarchical world. We live in systems of power and levels of authority and control. So, it's only natural that we would layer this thinking of our world onto God.

Mack says it this way, "I have always thought of God the Father as sort of being the boss and Jesus as the one following orders, you know, being obedient. I'm not sure how the Holy Spirit fits in exactly. ...the Spirit always seemed kind of a free spirit, but still under the direction of the Father." P. 121

So how do they work together? Papa in our story explains to Mack, "We have no concept of final authority among us, only unity. We are in a circle of relationship, not a chain of command...What you're seeing here is relationship without any overlay of power. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are defined by relationship to the other and none of the three has life apart from the other. Papa said, "we don't need power over the other because we are always looking out for the best. Hierarchy would make no sense among us." You and I are to understand that the trinity are a unique communion of love.

God is love, and love requires a relationship. (p. 32 fgs) That relationship is self-giving love. (p. 60 Migliore) The sermon title is Trinity: circle of love. A circle is without beginning, without end, that is God – self-sharing, other-regarding, community-forming love. 1 John 4 tells us "Whoever does not love, does not know God, for God is love. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us."

Mack needed to know love, needed love in his life, needed love as the rule and determiner in his life. Mack had hit a wall in his life – one he couldn't negotiate around; Mack had pain in his heart and life; he was hurt; anger and hopelessness were destroying him. Mack so very much needed to meet the God of perfect love so that his pain and his great sadness might be healed, so that he might live whole, so that he might have peace.

Mack met this God who IS love in *The Shack* and was changed.

God waits – to meet you and me -- so that we might come into relationship with God, might experience this circle of love, might have our lives changed.

One way God provided for us to experience love, forgiveness, healing and grace is through the sacrament of communion that we will now offer. Holy Communion --- an invitation into relationship with God who is fully about communion. Let us begin our remembering of what our great God did in love for us.

References and quotes are from

- Not Every Spirit: A Dogmatics of Christian Disbelief by Christopher Morse
- Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology by Daniel L. Migliore,
- Finding God in the Shack by Roger E. Olson
- The Shack by Wm. Paul Young