

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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## The Divine Dance vs the Closed Circle

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Grace to you and peace from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

There are days when the Trinity feels like a puzzle, an abstract problem for theologians with too much time and too many footnotes. And if we try to explain God like we explain a math equation, we will end up either confused, or proud, or both.

Today, I seek to move beyond the temptation to analyze the mechanics of the Trinity. The ancient Cappadocian teachers, mystics of the early church, emphasized that the nature of God is not primarily a riddle to solve but a reality to worship: a dynamic *flow*, radical relatedness, and perfect communion among the Three; a circle dance of love.

In the beginning, before anything else existed, there was no solitude, no domination, and no empire. Instead, there was Relationship. Genesis does not depict God as a solitary monarch on a throne. Instead, it begins with the Spirit moving, hovering over chaos like a mother bird over the waters. Creation commences not through violence, conquest, or coercion, but through speech, blessing, a separation that creates space, and a rhythm repeatedly marked by delight: “God saw that it was **good**.”

And then we open our phones. Or we turn on the news. And we see the horror of the headlines: a shooting at a mosque in southern California, human beings gathered in prayer, and two young men bringing death into a sacred place.

Call that what it is. Not “a tragedy” like an earthquake. Not “a misunderstanding.” Not “unfortunate.” It is terrorism. It is a manifestation of what we might call a closed circle of violence, a self-feeding system of fear, scapegoating, and hatred that keeps turning inward until it demands someone else’s blood to feel secure.

The central issue is this: the relational reality of the Triune God stands in direct and unwavering opposition to the closed circles of bigotry, fear, and violence that endanger our communities. The Trinity is not merely an abstract idea; it is God's commitment to love-in-communion. This reality challenges every system that persists through exclusion.

We must speak clearly and loudly. Not because the church enjoys conflict, but because silence is never neutral. Silence has a direction, and it almost always leans toward the powerful.

Now, more than ever, it must be stated clearly and without hesitation that the belief that God has uniquely blessed the United States with a divine right to dominate others is not patriotism; it is **idolatry**. When American exceptionalism is framed as part of "God's plan," it becomes Christian Nationalism, and Christian Nationalism is **heresy**. It dresses up the worship of power in religious language. It takes the cross, which is God's solidarity with the crucified, and turns it into a logo for conquest.

We must name the idol of White Supremacy as well, not merely as personal prejudice, but as a systemic evil. It is more than an individual sentiment; it is a structure, a narrative, an inheritance, and an infrastructure that continually recruits, justifies itself, and shapes individuals through fear. This system forms a closed circle: "We are threatened, so we must control. We must control, so we must exclude. We must exclude, so we must dehumanize. We must dehumanize, so we can harm."

That circle is demonic, not because we are looking for monsters under the bed, but because it is anti-Christ; it trains us to see neighbors as disposable. To attack Muslims at their mosque is to attack the image of God. Every human being bears the *imago Dei*. Not "some" people. Not "people like us." Not "people who worship as we do." The image of God is not a reward for correct belonging; it is a gift God gives before anyone earns anything.

White Supremacy and Christian Nationalism are fundamentally opposed to the Triune God because they require exclusion. In contrast, the Trinity reveals that God's nature is communion: diversity without domination, unity without erasure,

and difference without fear. God is not a solitary ruler defending boundaries, but love shared, given, and received.

Now listen again to the Gospel. Matthew takes us to a mountain in Galilee. The disciples encounter the risen Christ. And Matthew tells the truth about them: “they worshiped him; but some doubted.”

Which is to say that the Great Commission is not given to spiritual superheroes. It is given to a fragile community. A mixed bag. The faithful and the uncertain standing together. And Jesus does not scold them for their doubt. He commissions the doubters too!

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me,” Jesus declares. Consider, if this were imperial authority, what would follow? The authority of empires consistently leads to conquest: taking, extracting, dominating, and erasing. Empires do not commission communities to love; they commission armies to exert control.

However, Jesus’ authority operates differently. It becomes an exercise of invitation: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

This is not a command to impose sameness. It is not a license to colonize. It is not permission to treat other people as a project. It is the announcement that every nation, every people, every language, every neighbor, is invited into the life of God, into the Kin-dom of God.

Into what are they to be baptized? Not into allegiance to a nation-state, ethnic purity, or a fear-based identity. They are to be baptized into *the Name*, into triune communion, into the divine dance of communal love.

Jesus then offers a statement that transforms all: “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” This is God-with-us, Emmanuel. Not a distant ruler above us, nor a nostalgic figure behind us, but God present with us; in the depths, in the struggle, in places where bodies are threatened, sacred spaces are attacked, and the vulnerable are targeted.

That means when a mosque is attacked, Jesus is not standing with the shooter’s ideology. Jesus is standing with the terrified worshipers. Jesus is standing with the

victims. Jesus is standing against the closed circle of violence. Because the risen Christ still bears wounds. And those wounds tell us where God stands in a violent world.

So what do we do in response? We cannot merely lament, because lament that never moves becomes a way to stay comfortable. We are called to what we might name structural repentance; not only “I’m sorry,” but “we will change.” Not only feelings, but action. Not only individual kindness, but communal resistance.

How do we break the closed circles of violence? We refuse the normalization of lies and deceit. That means when racist, xenophobic, Islamophobic, or Christian Nationalist rhetoric shows up at the dinner table, at work, in a comment thread, in a “joke,” in a “just asking questions,” we interrupt it.

Not with performative outrage, but with moral clarity.

- “That’s not true.”
- “That’s dehumanizing.”
- “That’s not how Christians speak about neighbors.”
- “That’s a lie that gets people killed.”

You may not win the argument, but you may disrupt the circle. You may create an opening through which light can enter.

How else do we break the closed circles of violence? We stand in fierce, physical solidarity with our Muslim siblings and other targeted communities. Solidarity is not sympathy from a safe distance. Solidarity is proximity. It is showing up. It is letting the threatened know they are not alone. It is protecting sacred spaces, not because we need everyone to agree theologically, but because we recognize holiness when people gather to pray, and because we recognize God’s image when people are afraid.

Solidarity does not require erasing our theological distinctions; rather, it demands we embody the love Christ modeled, a love that protects and honors our neighbors without demanding sameness, while refusing any excuse for violence or hate. Our solidarity does not erase what makes us distinct; instead, it points to the kind of

love Christ calls us to embody, a love that protects, listens, and honors our neighbors without demanding sameness.

If a mosque in our region needs allies present after threats, show up. If an interfaith vigil is called, go. If Muslim neighbors are being harassed, be a barrier. If our community is tempted to move on, refuse. Because the church is not called to be a bystander. We follow a Savior who stepped between the powerful and the vulnerable; who took the world's violence into his body and broke its claim to "normal."

How else do we break the closed circles of violence? We divest from the empire's economy of scarcity and invest in God's economy of abundance. That can look like mutual aid, local organizing, advocacy, boycotting products from nation-states committing genocide, joining with groups that serve refugees and immigrants, supporting organizations like Global Refuge, or partnering with ministries and community networks that resist policies designed to warehouse the poor, criminalize homelessness, or weaponize fear.

It also requires building relationships across differences; not superficial connections that ignore conflict, but courageous relationships that dismantle the conditions for violence. This includes learning names, sharing meals, protecting one another, and fostering communities where propaganda cannot easily turn neighbors into adversaries. These acts of neighborliness could include inviting a neighbor for coffee, inquiring about their family, helping with simple tasks, participating in local events, or taking walks together in the neighborhood. Such everyday gestures foster trust and understanding. Closed circles thrive on isolation, while the divine dance fosters communion and community.

Beloved, God fervently desires to be in relationship with us. The Trinity is not God's private math problem. The Trinity is God's open life, God making room. The closed circle of violence says: "Protect yourself. Purify yourself. Fear the other. Control the future." But the divine dance says: "Come closer. Make room. Share life. Practice communion."

Here is the good news: participation in the divine dance does not depend on human perfection, but on God's faithfulness. The risen Christ does not declare, "I will be with you if you succeed." Instead, Jesus affirms, "I am with you **always**." This

promise holds even when the work is difficult, resistance is costly, opposition is loud, or doubt persists among disciples.

There are times when this calling may feel overwhelming, and fear or discouragement may arise. If you experience weariness or uncertainty, you are not alone. We undertake this work collectively, supporting one another in hope. Let us rely on each other, offer encouragement, and remember that God's presence sustains us through every challenge.

Therefore, depart from this place commissioned not to exercise power-over others, but to practice power-with others. Choose mutual care over domination, communion over exclusion, and expanding circles of grace over closed circles of violence. As you engage in the challenging work of confronting White Supremacy and Christian Nationalism, remember: the Triune God accompanies you. The Spirit moves ahead of you. Christ stands beside you. The Creator delights in every act of restoration and repair.

May the Triune God of communion, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, draw you into the divine dance. May Christ break every closed circle of fear. May the Spirit grant you courage for truth and compassion for neighbors. Go in peace, practicing power-with, until circles of violence are transformed into circles of grace. Amen.