

A Perichoresis of Possibility

Pondering Space Making

And Space Holding on Trinity Sunday

In the beginning, writes Nelle Morton, was the listening

I read Morton's words earlier this week and wondering what would come next had she chosen to continue to play with this metaphor, I thought the following.

In the beginning was the listening

The listening was with God

And the listening was God

And in her listening

That which was possible could be heard

In her listening

That which longed to be

Longed to become

Could be heard

And in that generous space of listening

The possible was heard into speech

Let there be light

Nelle Katherine Morton, who passed away in 1987, was a church activist for racial justice, a teacher of Christian educators, and, later in her life, one of the leading influences on the powerful and growing movement of women's spirituality and feminist theology in the US.

I first encountered her in the work of Quaker teacher Parker Palmer who writes the following of Morton's most famous phrase...

I now understand what Nelle Morton meant when she said that one of the greatest tasks of our time is to "hear people into speech". Behind fearful silence, we long to find our voice, to speak our voice, to have our voices heard. Might we learn to listen for those voices even before they are spoken—so that someday they can speak with truth and confidence.

What does it mean to listen to a voice before it is spoken? It means making space for the other, being aware of the other, paying attention to the other, honouring the other. It means not rushing to fill silence with fearful speech of our own and not trying to coerce another into saying the things that we want to hear. It means entering empathetically into another's world so that they perceive you as someone who has the promise of being able to hear another person's truth.

I am intrigued how robust and active

How engaged

Is this description of listening

It is not a mere absence of speech

And it certainly is not a simple waiting one's own turn

Palmer mentions paying attention, and just a few days ago I heard that French philosopher Simone Weil (Vay) says the following:

Attention is love...Attention, taken to its highest degree, is the same thing as prayer. It presupposes faith and love. Absolutely unmixed attention is prayer. If we turn our mind toward the good, it is impossible that little by little the whole soul will not be attracted thereto in spite of itself.

I am struck by the depth

And, if you will,

The rigour, and artfulness,

Of these different descriptions turned in towards each other.

In conversation with each other

Today is Trinity Sunday

It is one of my favourite special Sundays in the Christian Liturgical Calendar

Because Trinity is such an intriguing concept, yet one that is held within so many Christian circles (pardon the pun, which hopefully will be more evident in a few paragraphs) in such a dogmatic and frankly exclusionary fashion.

I have this book on my shelf, from another moment in my own life and an attempt to be in dialogue with someone from a very strict stream in the Christian Tradition.

DOCTRINE: What Christians Are Supposed to Believe

It's often treated that way

That there are certain beliefs that one must hold

In order to be rightly considered a Christian

The thing is that while liberal streams of Christianity may characterize conservative streams for holding this

Often liberal (including our United Church of Canada) can become similarly focused on that there are certain affects (or feelings) about things that one must hold in order to rightly be considered a Christian

Which is not the same as holding deep convictions

A third way is possible

One of a depth of a commitment to a way of being in the world

So, what if Trinity

Is to be understood

Not as a static truth

As in the Christian God is Triune, one in three and three in one, and that this is the only Christian explanation of God

Not a Doctrine

But a teaching

An opening up of a way of being

Last year's Trinity Sunday sermon gets at the traditional understanding a bit more, and you can find it here...

https://mcusercontent.com/a0f92b629ef5d45b6f7677645/files/744525cc-03aa-373d-8a13-8246a196c58b/Trinity_Sunday_Sermon_2020.pdf

This reflection is titled

A Perichoresis of Possibility

Perichoresis

A 4th century theological term (and don't let the term theology scare you off, it simply means the act of speaking and wondering about God)

A 4th century theological term that pointed towards the idea

That at the core of what the Christian imagined in God

Is dynamic interrelated movement

Perichoreses means circle dance

Not that God is a dancer

And not necessarily that the dance is being undertaken by a trio

But that what we are pointing towards when we name God

Is not a static singularity from which all things emerge and towards which all things are pointed

But a dynamic relationality in which all things participate

There is a unity but not a uniformity and certainly not a conformity

But instead

A conversation - conversare

A turning towards

But the point with that which is a dynamic teaching rather than static doctrine

Is not to prove that this is the correct answer to the question

What is God?

But the point becomes

How does one engage

How does one enter the dance?

And the element of that question

That has me thinking this week

Is about space

How do we inhabit space

How do we take up space

How do we give space

How do we make space

How do we hold space

Because to dance in a circle – perichoresis

Or to sing in a chorus (choresis)

Is as much about the how one's own actions/notes/movements

Interact with the other voices/bodies in motion

For years, Cheryl and I have worked in leadership in the camping industry, church and non-church.

Most recently this has included running the Leadership Training Program for Lumsden Beach Camp

And with the young leaders

One of our favourite activities is called group juggling

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLV_psSi_rE

(Note – as a team-building facilitation geek, I have loads of opinions about the facilitation of this example, but that's another whole sermon in and of itself).

The group is in a circle (very peri-choretic of us)

We start with the yellow beanbag

It is thrown from person to person

And one must remember who threw it to them

And to whom they threw the yellow bean bag

When the order is memorized

We put down the yellow bean-bag and pick up the blue one

And then we do the same but in a different order

That one is memorized

Then we bring back the yellow beanbag

So two bean bags are travelling around and across the circle in different directions

Sometimes we'll add a third

Often instead we add a chain of high fives

Where one physically jogs across the circle and high fives someone taking their spot in the circle, which means that the person from whom one receives the bean bags and to whom one throws are constantly in motion.

It usually descends into chaos, hopefully with lots of laughter (but occasionally with groaning at the person who drops the bean bag).

Around here we pause

And we imagine

How does the challenge change

And how do each of us change our own participation

When the goal becomes collective rather than individual

People being people

Tend to focus on their own catching and throwing

But when they begin to focus on ensuring that the person throwing to them knows where they are

On ensuring that the person they are throwing to has a good catchable toss/doesn't have two beanbags coming from two directions

When they watch what their neighbour on either side are doing, help point people out, offer encouragement...then the group really begins to juggle.

There are intentional practices of being in the circle to which one can commit oneself

Which one can practice

That holds the space

That holds the circle

That engages attention

That exercise becomes the framework

Through which the group is invited to imagine how they will work together on projects

How they might make group decisions

Make plans

How they might engage with inter-personal conflict

How, to use Nelle Morton's term, they might hear one another into speech

<https://knoxmetregina.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Sermon-May-23.pdf>

Last week's Pentecost Reflection

An Expansive Glossolalia

Pondered the possibilities of speaking new words, and entering into new conversations

And I hope it pairs nicely with this week

The two Row Wampum is a treaty between the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (whose ancestral land is not divided by the Ontario/Quebec and Canada/US borders) and Dutch traders who came to Turtle Island/The people's Island in the early 1600s.

<https://www.onondaganation.org/culture/wampum/two-row-wampum-belt-guswenta/>

It is one row of white beads, one row of blue, a second row of white beads, and second row of blue and one final row of white.

The metaphor was simple and profound

Two ships like siblings, the Dutch trading vessels and the Haudenosaunee canoe, travel side by side, two rows of blue separated by one row of white, room for both, neither infringing on the space of the other, both mutually enriched by the other's presence.

The thing with moving from Doctrine to teaching

Is that it is no longer static

It no longer allows faith to include disembodied belief that one holds at a distance from one's own and communal action.

On Trinity Sunday

We proclaim a Perichoresis of Possibility

That there is a dance

Of space making and space holding

That hears one another into speech

That hears our own selves into true speech

It is attention and intention

It is rigorous and practical/practice-able

In the beginning was the listening

In the beginning is the dance