

***From Graduation to Commencement, Part 3: Trinity***  
**Sermon on Romans 5:1-5 & 12:3-18 (5/30 & 5/31/15)**  
**Jennifer M. Hallenbeck**

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I am going to begin this message with most of an essay by Christian writer Anne Lamott. I recently read this essay in her 2014 book *Small Victories: Spotting Improbable Moments of Grace*. It's an essay about the power of community... and, because today's sermon centers around community, I couldn't help but think of this essay. The essay is entitled "Barn Raising" and, while Ms. Lamott first published it years ago, the story it tells will ring true no matter the time. She writes this:

"On an otherwise ordinary night at the end of September, some friends came over to watch the lunar eclipse, friends whose two-year-old daughter, Olivia, had been diagnosed nine months earlier with cystic fibrosis. Their seven-year-old daughter, Ella, is [my son] Sam's oldest friend ...

"Now ... [they] must live with the fact that their younger daughter has this disease that fills its victims' lungs with thick sludge, harboring infections. Two-week hospital stays for nonstop IV antibiotics are common. Adulthood is rare.

"Twice a day, every day, her parents must pound her between the shoulder blades for forty-five minutes to dislodge the mucus from her lungs. It amazes me that Sara, the mother ... can still even dress herself, much less remain so tender and strong ...

"Ella calls her little sister Livia; she stayed overnight with us the day Olivia was born, and we cooked pancakes in the shape of the letter O to celebrate the baby's arrival. From the beginning, Olivia always got sicker than other babies; she caught colds that wouldn't leave ... But her doctor never found anything really wrong, and antibiotics always seemed to clear up the symptoms. Now she and I hang out together in her room and eat chocolate, and I tell her that in a very long time, when we both go to heaven, we should try to get chairs next to each other, close to the dessert table. 'Yes!' she agrees ...

"Whenever I'm out of town I worry that there will be bad news when I come home, that friends will have come over to their house not knowing they were about to come down with a cold, and Olivia will end up back in the hospital on the two-week IV drip. She has a blue toy phone that she calls me on frequently. Sometimes when I am out of town, I imagine her calling me and chatting away on her phone.

"I was gone for a week of teaching at the end of the summer this year, and I kept thinking of her. I almost called California to hear her voice ... I didn't call Olivia, but I kept her in my prayers. I said to God, 'Look, I'm sure you know what you're doing, but my patience is beginning to wear a little thin ...'

“After the diagnosis, we were almost too stunned to cry. Olivia's family has a tribe of good friends around them, and everyone wanted to help, but at first people didn't know what to do; they were immobilized by shock and sadness.

“By mid-January, though, I had a vision of the disaster as a gigantic canvas on which an exquisitely beautiful picture had been painted.

“We all wanted to take up a corner or stand side by side and lift it together so that Olivia's parents didn't have to carry the whole thing themselves. But I saw that they did in fact have to carry almost the whole heartbreaking picture alone. Then the image of a canvas changed into one wall of a barn, and I saw that the people who loved them could build a marvelous barn of sorts around the family.

“So we did. We raised a lot of money: catastrophes can be expensive. We showed up. We cleaned, we listened, some of us took care of the children, we walked their dog, and we cried and then made them laugh; we gave them privacy; then we showed up and listened and let them cry and cry and cry, and then took them for hikes ...

“We kept on cooking for them and walking the dog, taking the kids to the park, cleaning the kitchen, and [Olivia's parents] hate what was going on when they needed to. Sometimes we let them resist finding any meaning or solace in anything involving their daughter's diagnosis, and this was one of the hardest things to do – to stop trying to make things come out better than they were.

“We let [Olivia's parents] spew when they needed to; we offered the gift of no comfort when having no comfort was where they had landed. Then we shopped for groceries. One friend gave them weekly massages; everyone kept giving money. And that is how we built our...barn.

“Now things are sometimes pretty terrible for the family in many ways, but at the same time, they got a miracle ... it wasn't the one they wanted, where God would reach down from the sky and touch their girl with a magic wand and restore her to perfect health. Maybe that will still happen – who knows? I wouldn't put anything past God, because He or She is [pretty] crafty ... Yet they did get a miracle ... and they understand this ...

“On the night of the lunar eclipse, we were all together and Sara was in a wonderful mood]. The viral cloud of autumn was about to descend, though, and this meant the family was about to find itself more exposed to danger, to cold germs, flu bugs, and well-meaning friends. There would be constant vigilance, fewer visits, endless hand-washing, extra requests for prayer.

“There are a number of churches...around the country whose congregations pray for Olivia every week. And maybe it is helping. Still, the specter of the cold season hung above Olivia's parents that night like the mysterious shape-shifting

moon ... Olivia hung out with her mother and me. We all stared up into the sky for a long time, as millions and millions of people everywhere were doing, so we got to feel united under the strange beams of light.

“You could tell you were in the presence of the extraordinary, peering up at the radiance beneath the veil of shadow, the intensity of that rim of light struggling through its own darkness. Olivia kept clapping her hands against the sides of her face in wonder ...

“[Sara and I] stood outside for a while longer, talking about [Olivia’s] last flare-up, how frightened Sara had felt, how tired. And I didn’t know what to say at first. Except that we, their friends, all know that the rains and the wind will come, and they will be cold – oh God, will they be cold. But then *we* will come, too, I said; we will have been building this barn all along, and so there will always be shelter.”<sup>1</sup>

*“We, their friends, all know that the rains and the wind will come, and they will be cold ... But then we will come, too ... we will have been building this barn all along, and so there will always be shelter.”*  
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As I introduced that story by Anne Lamott, I mentioned I thought to use it because this sermon is centered around the concept of community. And, clearly, that story is all about the community of supportive friends surrounding that particular family as they lived with their young daughter’s critical illness.

Community is essential if we are to live well and joyfully in this world. And, as we close out this “From Graduation to Commencement” sermon series, the concept of *community* seems like a good place to spend some time.  
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This is, indeed, the third and final sermon in a sermon series called “From Graduation to Commencement.”

We’re using this series to frame three significant holy days in the Church – holy days not every church spends a lot of time honoring, but that we have chosen to honor here at McCabe...the three holy days being Ascension Day, Pentecost, and the celebration of the Holy Trinity. *From Graduation to Commencement.*

The first week of this series, as we explored the story of Jesus’ ascension into heaven, we thought about how, like *graduation*, the ascension of Jesus was an ending. To graduate from something is to finish it, to complete it.

The disciples had spent their time and energy learning all they could from Jesus...when he ascended into heaven, he was no longer physically present with

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1 Lamott, Anne in *Small Victories*. pp. 213-222.

them to be that in-person teacher. So that day marked a significant ending – a graduation – for the disciples.

That day was also a shift toward the beginning of something new, because Ascension Day was the transition for the disciples from being the *students*, to becoming the teachers. Disciples to *apostles*.

Plus, on Ascension Day, Jesus commissioned his disciples to tell the whole world about him – and he promised the Holy Spirit would bless them with the ability to do just that.

Then, on *Pentecost*, the mission of telling the world about Jesus began. It *commenced*. See, on the day of Pentecost – as recorded in chapter 2 of the New Testament book of Acts – the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples like wind and fire. When the Spirit descended, the disciples were miraculously able to speak about Jesus in languages they did *not* already know.

When this happened, there were folks from many countries present to witness it...folks who spoke the languages the Spirit allowed the disciples to speak. So, on the day of Pentecost, in a very real sense, the disciples – now apostles – had begun to tell the whole world about Jesus.

Ascension to Pentecost. *From graduation to commencement...*

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In churches that follow what's called “the liturgical calendar,”

Ascension Day is celebrated 40 days after Easter, Pentecost is celebrated 50 days after Easter, and, the Sunday after Pentecost is then a celebration of the Holy Trinity. Personally, I enjoy celebrating these three church holidays. They do not get the cultural air time that Christmas and Easter get, but, in many ways, they are just as important for Christians to keep in mind.

As I thought about how we might celebrate them here at McCabe, it struck me that these three holidays would be falling within graduation season...and that, really, the three days put together make for a pretty great “graduation to commencement” series.

Well, at least Ascension and Pentecost fit well with a “graduation to commencement” concept: Ascension to Pentecost...an ending into a beginning. *Graduation to commencement*. They make for a nice two-part, packaged deal. But I wanted a third part.

I desperately wanted the celebration of the Holy Trinity to fit in as a third and final piece to this series. It just took me a while to figure out how to make that happen.

When the concept of “community” occurred to me, I knew God had sent me the missing piece of inspiration.

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The celebration of the Holy Trinity is a tough nut to crack because any preacher worth their salt bases their sermon concept and message off of a particular Scripture reading. But, the Holy Trinity is never mentioned by name in the Bible. So there's no clear Scripture from which to base a sermon that's to be about the Holy Trinity.

Before I say more, let me be clear on something – because I try not to assume everyone knows what our “churchy words” mean.

The “Holy Trinity” is our Christian understanding of God as three persons in one, divine being. When we refer to God as “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” (or “Holy Ghost”), we are referring to the Holy Trinity.

Trinity is a word meaning tri-unity...three parts that are somehow a unified whole. Three things so interconnected they cannot actually be defined as being separate from one another – yet they are, in fact, distinct beings. Father, Son, Spirit. The Holy Trinity.

Now, while the word “Trinity” is not found anywhere in the Bible, the concept itself lives throughout the pages of Scripture. For example, Romans 5:1-5, which we heard read a bit ago, refers to each person of the Trinity – and even to the unique and holy work each person of the Trinity does. Hear again the words of Romans 5:1-5...

“By faith we have been made acceptable to God [the Father]. And now, because of our Lord Jesus Christ we live at peace with God. Christ also introduced us to God's undeserved kindness on which we take our stand. So we are happy, as we look forward to sharing in the glory of God. But that's not all! We gladly suffer, because we know that suffering helps us to endure. And endurance builds character, which gives us a hope that will never disappoint us. All of this happens because God [the Father] has given us the Holy Spirit, who fills our hearts with his love.”

Father, Son, Spirit – the Trinity: a community of holy power, working together to create, to forgive, and to lovingly guide us. That is the God we worship. How exactly God exists as Trinity will always be a mystery not fully explainable. But if there is one thing we should keep in mind about God as Holy Trinity, it's this: that our God exists in community, that we are created in God's image, and that means we, too, were created to exist in community.

Let me say that again. If there is one thing we should keep in mind about God as Holy Trinity, it's this: that our God exists in community, that we are created in God's image, and that means we, too, were created to exist in community.

(Okay, so that was really *three* things we should keep in mind. But, hey, we're talking about our three-in-one God, so giving you three things to remember sort of fits the bill!)

See, in order to live with joy and meaning in this world, *community* is essential – both giving *to* and receiving *from* a community.

On this past Thursday, *community* came alive for Caleb Olson and his family (who gave me permission to talk about them, by the way).

As many of you are aware, Caleb is one of our McCabe high school youth and he was in a skiing accident in March that, at this point, has him paralyzed from the waist down.

I just said community came alive for Caleb and his family this past Thursday, but, really, *community* has been coming alive for them over the past couple of months – ever since the accident. *Community* came alive through an initial push for monetary donations that would support medical costs...*community* came alive for them through cards, text messages, phone calls, video chats, and gifts.

*Community* came alive when their friends, neighbors, family, and McCabe church family gathered to help make the modifications needed in order for their home to become wheelchair-accessible. And on Thursday, it was such a blessing to witness hundreds of people support them in so many different ways through the benefit that was held at the Mandan Eagles Club.

People made and served food and baked goods...people brought silent auction items...people cleared tables...people collected money...Caleb's fellow choir members came and put on a concert... and, of course, so very many people showed-up to eat and to be in supportive fellowship with the family.

Over the course of the benefit on Thursday night, I kept thinking about that “Barn Raising” story by Anne Lamott. Because we all need a community that builds a barn around us – a community that shelters us when the harsh weather of life blows in.

We were *created* to need such community...and we were *created* to be *part* of such communities. Because we are created in the image of God who exists in community.

We need community all the time: in the midst of catastrophe and in the midst of the simple joys of everyday life. Burdens are lighter and joys are greater when they are shared with others. We all know this. We all understand this...because it's built into our DNA. God put *community* within our very souls.

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Graduation season is the perfect time to take a moment to focus on the gift of community. Those graduating got to that place by the grace of God and through their particular community of love, challenge, and support.

And, as our graduates commence – as they begin their next steps on life's journey, their community will expand. It will *need* to expand if they are to experience the fullness of life's joys and challenges.

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Just as God exists in community as the Holy Trinity, and just as each person of the Trinity offers a unique gift to the world, we, too, offer unique gifts to the communities of which we are part.

As St. Paul wrote in Romans chapter 12, “A body is made up of many parts, and each of them has its own use. That's how it is with us. There are many of us, but we each are part of the body of Christ, as well as part of one another.”

Perhaps your gift is prophecy, perhaps it's service, perhaps it's teaching. Perhaps your gift is in encouraging others or your gift is in generosity of time, talent, or resources. Perhaps your gift is leadership or wisdom.

Whatever your gift, it's important in your particular community – your community of friends, family, and neighbors...as well as in *this* particular community of McCabe United Methodist Church.

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Community *is* an important gift. It's what we were created for – to give to and receive from our communities. Because that is who our Triune God is: Father, Son, and Spirit – the holiest of communities, blessing us with grace, day after day. Thanks be. Amen.