

“We are Connected”

Based on Proverbs 8:1-4, 22-31 and John 16:12-15

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Today in the Christian calendar is Trinity Sunday. It has been a long standing practice in the church to dedicate the first Sunday after Pentecost to the doctrine of the Trinity. A lot can be said about the Trinity. Indeed, thousands and thousands of books have been written on the subject. It is a doctrine that pushes the extremes of logic. How does  $1+1+1=1$ ? How can we say that we worship one god instead of three? Trying to explain this conundrum has been attempted in a number of ways. St. Patrick famously pointed to a three leaf clover. Another old image is that of fire: the fire itself is the Father, the light of the fire is the Son and the heat that emits from the fire is the Holy Spirit. This Christian comedian I used to listen to as a kid, Mike Warnke, used to explain the Trinity by pointing to a cherry pie. Take the pie and cut it into three pieces. You have the three separate pieces but the cherry filling can't be divided up. In the same way the Trinity is three Persons but one Substance.

Today I want to focus our attention on how our understanding of God as Three in One captures a key aspect of who God is, which is that God is relational. Whatever it means to say that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are three separate Persons, these Persons are so totally interrelated that all three work together. None of them work independently of the other. They are totally interdependent, a harmonious community of three. This total interdependence reflects the relational nature of God. God is a relational God. That's our focus.

First, let's look at this amazing portrayal of Wisdom we find in Proverbs. In this poetic passage, Wisdom, or Sophia in Greek, is personified. She is portrayed as having been born from God as the first created being. She is by God's side through the whole creation process. And she continually rejoices in God, delighting in the world that God made and in the human race.

In all these ways, Wisdom is related to the Creator God. From the beginning, before anything else was created, God gave birth to Wisdom to be in relation with all throughout the creation process. God did not want to be alone. We have come to understand this portrayal of Wisdom as referring to the Holy Spirit. Like we read in Gen. 1:2, the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. That Spirit, according to Proverbs 8, was Sophia, Wisdom.

Now let's look at what Jesus says about the Spirit. Jesus identifies this as the Spirit of truth. Jesus says that the Spirit declares what he hears from the Father. He does not speak on his own. In the same way Jesus has told his disciples that he does not speak on his own but only what he hears from the Father. So what Jesus is saying is that the Spirit who will come after he returns to the Father will continue doing what Jesus has been doing with them, which is teaching them what the Father wants taught. Jesus also says that the Spirit will lead the disciples into all truth. What does this mean? Does this mean that there is more revelation from God than what Jesus was able to tell the disciples? Perhaps it does mean that. But it could also mean that what the Spirit will do is to help the disciples more fully understand who Jesus is and what Jesus taught. When the disciples faced new situations, the Spirit would reveal to them new insights into Jesus' teachings. The stories he taught would take on deeper meanings. The Spirit would help the disciples answer the clichéd question that was very popular several years ago: "what would Jesus do?". So this was the role of the Holy Spirit, to continue the teaching ministry of Jesus after he left the disciples and returned to the Father. It is the Spirit that keeps the disciples connected with the Father and the Son. The Spirit makes relationship with God possible.

So let me try to bring all this back down to earth, past the theological musings, and ground all this in our life together as a community. What can the Trinity reveal to us about God and our relationship with God?

If the Trinity means anything, it means that God is inherently relational. God is not a single entity in a far distant heaven. No, God is three Persons working together in a perfect, interdependent relationship. In God's essence there is interdependent relationship. The Father reveals

truth through the Son by the Holy Spirit. None of them go rogue. All three work together in every situation. They are a team to the maximum level.

We, who have been made in the image of God, are made to be in relationship. We are relational creatures. We all need to belong somewhere. We need a family, whether blood relation or not. We need a group to run around with. We need friends. We need to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. We need community. As an aside, this is why solitary confinement is so punishing and, in fact, can cause deep mental and emotional trauma. Studies have shown how children who are isolated from human touch have profound effects on their emotional development. To thrive as human beings we need community.

So when it comes to understanding the things of God and the way of Jesus, the Spirit teaches us these things in community. It is true that you can read the Bible for yourself and interpret it on your own. But let's face it, there is a lot of the Bible that is really hard to understand. Most of us need some help from others who have dedicated their lives to interpreting the Bible to share their insights. Trust me, I don't come up with these sermons all by myself. I read a number of Bible interpreters, letting their insights guide my own thinking as I craft these sermons. I have found it much more fruitful to study the Bible with others. The study of Galatians we had a few weeks back was wonderful because we were provided excellent discussion questions and had great conversations. We all got much more out of Galatians than if we had just read it on our own or answered the reflection questions by ourselves. The Bible has always been meant to be read and studied in community.

Also, understanding where God is working in our lives is discovered in conversation. My family lived about twelve miles away from church. When it was time for youth group on Sunday evening, the youth pastor would drive a van out to Edmond where me and a few other kids in the youth group lived. When we got in the van he would ask each of us, "Where have you seen Jesus this week?" That was our conversation for the 15-20 minute drive to church. Sure, I could have sat there in the silence of my own space and contemplated where I had recently seen Jesus. But in the conversation, as people told their stories,

it prompted my own observations. Or maybe I had something to share first which got others talking. It was easier to name where we saw God working in our lives when we had a conversation about it. And certainly when it comes to discerning what your purpose in life is, what your vocation is, that takes a lot of conversation with a lot of people. I know some people have a dream or have some powerful spiritual experience that makes them believe they have been called into the ministry. I had one of those powerful experiences myself. But just claiming that experience isn't going to get you a preachers license. There is a long discernment process done in community to confirm that call. And that's true for any vocation, not just being a preacher. Whatever God has called you to do with your life, you discover it and are affirmed in that call by others. It is in community that we get clear how God is working in our lives.

Whenever a church is trying to discover what their next faithful step will be, the Spirit is the one who will reveal the possibilities. But this is not done with just the pastor or a couple of people. The whole church has to discern the next faithful step together. It is prayerful conversations of the church, not just one or two people, that guide a church into the future faithfully. We saw that here at St. Luke's when we came together to discern whether or not our next faithful step should have been to become a second location of King Avenue. It seemed clear to us that now was not the time. As the United Methodist Church looks into a murky future, in which division is likely, our faithful future will not be decided by a couple of folks. It will take many conversations from a huge swath of people to discern what our next faithful step will be. In fact, there are a couple of conversations being planned right now in which you can come and be a part. One will be held in late July at Worthington UMC by a group called UMC Next. Another one being organized by some of us in the Reconciling Ministries Network is being organized for later this year to talk through how we will respond when the new Book of Discipline goes into effect in January. Look for detailed information about how you can be a part of those conversations. It takes these ongoing conversations for the Spirit to guide us a church and denomination faithfully into the future.

The last thing I want to say about the Trinity is to express gratitude for the Spirit. As you know, last week we celebrated Pentecost, when the Spirit fell down on the disciples, propelling them outside the four walls of their safe house and on to the streets to proclaim the mighty acts of God. That same Spirit continues to be poured on us day by day. It is the Holy Spirit that connects us with God, so that God is not remote and distant but as near as our breath. Being the temples of the Holy Spirit that we are, in some mysterious way God is present within each of us, which is one reason why every single one of us is precious. It is the Spirit that makes that connection real. But the Spirit doesn't only connect us with God. The Spirit connects us with each other. Each of us share in this same Spirit. If the Spirit was the internet we would all be online, linked to each other. The Spirit is like wi-fi that connects us all together. And just as you can Facetime with someone right now who is living in Japan, geography does not matter in our Spirit connection with each other. No matter where you and I are at any given moment we are connected as many parts of one body, the body of Christ. And not only is geography not a limit to our connection but neither is time. When our loved ones die, we are still connected to them. And we have the promise that one day we will be with them again. It is the Spirit that connects us with our ancestors. And it is the Spirit that will connect us with those who will come after us, even to the thousandth generation, if you can even imagine that. The Spirit of God connects us beyond space and time. The community that you and I belong to, made possible by the Spirit, truly is incomprehensibly huge. We all belong in a way that none of us fully comprehend or appreciate. The web of relationships made possible by the Spirit is unfathomable. At the bare minimum I can tell you that although in a few weeks I will no longer be your pastor we will remain connected in a spiritual sense. And this cord will not be broken. So I give gratitude to the Spirit who makes possible our relationship with God and with each other, a relationship that by God's grace will never be lost.