

“Reality is Relational”
John 3:1-17
May 27, 2018
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Last week, on Pentecost Sunday, I mentioned that I love Pentecost. I love the Pentecost story, the Holy Spirit coming to the disciples with great power and bringing them the miracle of speaking in different languages. It speaks to me because it is a miracle of overcoming barriers, of welcoming the stranger, of God speaking to us where we are. And I get that. But today is Trinity Sunday, which I also love.

Trinity Sunday is great because some of the best music of the church is used for Trinity Sunday. I love singing “Holy, Holy, Holy” and “Come, Thou Almighty King.” And the concept of the Trinity. Do you want to know what that is all about? Shall I take some time now to explain the Trinity? Do you want to know how it is that God is one and God is three at the same time? So do I. I don't really get the Trinity. I don't know if anyone really does. I used to have this conversation with Elizabeth Kutsche who was one of the saints of this church who has now passed on and for sure she now understands this far better than me. But while she was on this side of the veil, she would occasionally ask me about the Trinity. She would say, “I understand God the Father, and I understand Jesus and how he came to die for our sins, and I even understand God as the Holy Spirit, but I don't understand the Trinity and how all that works together.” And in my pride, I would think that I could explain it to her and the light bulb would go on and she would say, “Oh! Now I understand! Thank you!” But that never happened because to explain something one must understand it. And I don't. It's a mystery.

Maybe it's because of the number three. We don't really like odd numbers do we? We like things to be nice and even. Think about it. Even numbers promote pairs, easy dyads for conversation. Three is harder. It's why groups of three are difficult. Do you know what I mean? Situations of three introduce a different ethos than those of two or four. What happens? You frequently end up leaving someone out or you are left out, when the two seem to get along better without you, or you get along better with one over the other. If you're a single person, isn't it harder to go out with a couple rather than just one other

person? If you're part of a couple, don't you like to go out with another couple, isn't that more comfortable? Maybe this comes from our Greek rational heritage. Things are either one thing or another. We see things as black or white, material or spiritual, right or left.

Furthermore, our world seems to operate in, perhaps prefer, even numbers -- four sides to a table; two children (and, let's make sure there's one of each gender) so that each parent can be in charge of one child. Even numbers seem to secure a certain the sense of order and predictability we have come to expect from numbers. Of expectation and dependability. Add the odd person and it's the odd person out. All of a sudden prospected patterns of behavior, anticipated actions of relational dynamics, are offset.¹

Odd numbers? The number three? Well, thus enters a disquieting disequilibrium. A lack of control. When you have three, the dynamics change. I know for us, things changed when that third child came along. All of a sudden as parents, we were outnumbered. We were forced to pay attention to more than one person, the one right in front of you. We had to listen to more than one person. Perhaps at the same time. Erin had Kendall, I had Annie, but where was that Brandon and who was supposed to be watching him? That's the problem and promise of three.

Perhaps that's one of the reasons it is said that St. Patrick had an easier time when he preached the gospel to the Celtic peoples in Ireland. It is said that the Celts already understood reality not in an either or way, but in threes. The Celts did not see the world in terms of black and white but rather as black, white and gray; not as day and night, but as day, night and twilight. So when Patrick explained God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, that made sense to them. I don't know that it really does to me.

The best I can do is to understand this not in an intellectual sense, but as a relationship. Some one once described the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as the Lover, the Beloved, and the Loving. That makes sense to me. The Lover, the Beloved, and the Loving. That describes God as a relationship. In God's self, God loves, and God receives love, and God is the love itself. We don't describe God intellectually, we

1 Lewis, Karoline.

meet him, we know him. We don't rationally plan out our lives, we live them, in relationship to God and to one another. This week Erin and I celebrated our 32nd anniversary. Any of you who are or have been married realize that there are three of you in the relationship. There's you, there's your spouse, and there's the relationship. Reality is not a rational understanding but reality is relational. The Trinity proclaims that God is relational, that God in God's self, loves and receives love and all creation comes into being not because God needs someone to talk to, but as an overflowing of God's love. For God so loved. That the world came into being. For God so loved that he sent his Son. For God so loved that the Spirit blows through our lives and hearts and loves us and bring us here to love one another.

John Buchanan, former pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago tells of a time when he baptized a two year old child. He read the standard affirmation just as we did this morning: "You have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." Unexpectedly the child responded, "Uh-oh." Buchanan writes: "It was an appropriate response . . . a stunning theological affirmation."² In Larke's baptism today, in all of our worship, every time we gather here together, we affirm again the relationship that we have entered into, that of children of God and family to one another. Uh-oh. We are not in this by ourselves. We are made to be in relationship, just like God is in relationship. We are related to God, we are related to one another. Maybe we are like a trinity also. Lover, Beloved, Loving. So it is. So may it be.

2 Long, Thomas. *Living the Word: The Christian Century*. May 9, 2018.