The Relationality of God

Sermon preached by Jennifer Hudson, St. Thomas' Episcopal Church, Bethel, CT, May 31, 2026

Matthew 28:16-20

Did you ever realize that when we say "God is love," we most often erupt into smiles, and yet when we say "God is Trinity," one God in three persons, we may in our befuddlement scrunch our eyebrows, maybe even mentally check out? What does it even mean to say one God in three persons?

Thankfully, I'm going to spare you a theology lecture. Because, I'll be honest, the doctrine of the Trinity is difficult even for this seminarian to understand, despite—and maybe because—of the texts I've read on the subject. Admittedly, the only things about the Trinity I can say I've apprehended are that 1) God as Trinity is a mystery; and 2)—and this is, perhaps, the most important thing—God is relational.

St. Augustine once said, "if you see love, you see the Trinity." And that's true. The three persons are not avatars, nor are they three separate gods, nor are they hierarchical. They are distinct, yes, and yet indivisible, always in relationship. To say "God is Trinity" is also to say to say that God's being is eternally relational, which is also to say that "God is love" because love is relational.

When we call God Father, we do because Jesus called God Father. Yet Jesus also described God as a mother hen gathering us under her wing. I realize not everyone is comfortable talking about God in parental terms. Not all earthly family relationships are healthy. But Jesus' descriptions show the depth of the relationship between Jesus and God the Creator and God the Spirit. They also show the depth of the relationships with God and with each other that God desires for us.

And God desires these relationships for us because they are where love is shared and experienced. Again, love is relational.

And yet not everyone gets to experience being in relationship with others or with God. Not everyone gets to experience love in its diverse expressions. According to Laurie Santos, a cognitive scientist and professor of psychology at Yale, surveys reveal that 60 percent of people in the U.S. report feeling lonely on a regular basis.[1] 60 percent! Just think of how many in their loneliness hunger for connection, for love, for a place to belong. Just think of the ways in which we as this St. Thomas' community of faith might feed that hunger. Because as followers of Jesus, the love and relationality of our triune God is most fully known in community. That is why Jesus instructs "Go therefore, make disciples of all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Baptism is the sacrament in which we are adopted into the family of our relational God, where we are welcomed into beloved community.

Miroslav Volf, a theologian at Yale Divinity School, has written that churches represent communion with our triune God. Volf writes a parish, at its best, is a community of grace, a welcoming and embracing community.[2] But embodying the love and relationality of God as Trinity goes far beyond being a welcoming and embracing community; it requires being a *radically* welcoming and inclusive community. "Radical" means both going back to fundamental

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[1] "Why Americans Are Lonelier and Its Effects on Our Health." PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, 8 Jan. 2023, www.pbs.org/newshour/show/why-americans-are-lonelier-and-its-effects-on-our-health. Retrieved 27 April 2024.

[2] Volv, Miroslav. *After Our Likeness: The Church in the Image of the Trinity*. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1998.

roots as well as prompting social change, and so radical welcome and inclusivity for us as Christians means going back to the way Jesus practiced welcome and inclusivity as well as the way in which he incorporated social change into his ministry. As the Rev. Stephanie Spellers puts it, radical welcome is the spiritual practice of embracing and being changed by the gifts, presence, voices, and power of The Other: the people systemically cast out of or marginalized within a church, a denomination and/or society.[3] Radical welcome, then, is making space for The Other, including the lonely, to be active participants in a beloved community that embodies the love and strength of togetherness and being in right relationship.

I look at the ways in which this St. Thomas' community is already embodying radical welcome and the relational love of our triune God. I saw yesterday how we shared God's all-inclusive love with the LGBTQ+ community at our shared table with Christ Church, Redding at Bethel Pride. I see it in that beautiful new banner in front of our church that greets passersby. I see it in the music ministries and Sunday school activities. I see it in our parish history project (see me after the service if you'd like to get involved in that). I see it in our chicken parm dinners, ecumenical and interfaith services, pulpit swaps, and collections for the Bethel Community Food Pantry. I see it in the ways you have welcomed, included, and allowed me to both share with and learn from you as your seminarian intern this year.

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[3] Spellers, Stephanie. *Radical Welcome: Embracing God, The Other, and the Spirit of Transformation*. Church Publishing, New York, NY, 2006.

In all these ways and more we embody the relationality of our triune God, we embody beloved community, and we embody the all-inclusive love of God. I can't wait to see the ways in which we continue this embodiment when I return from my summer Sabbath on September 13th. I thank all of you for a wonderful year. Indeed, in you I have seen love and the Trinity.