

God so Free, and so Bound in Holy Union

Psalm 8

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In premarital conversations, I ask couples, “Do you expect there to be any change in your level of independence, after you marry?” People really love their independence, and so most newlyweds-to-be tell me no. “No, I don’t expect there to be any change in my independence.”

That’s fine. There aren’t any right or wrong answers to this question. We’re just thinking together about how this extraordinarily intense relationship of mutual commitment (a marriage) is shaped, what the expectations are.

Folks don’t want to give up their independence, but they are more than happy to surrender and share their responsibilities. When they marry, they tell me, it will be “nice to have someone to help me with things.” With cooking and cleaning, maintaining the car, paying the rent, fixing things, doing the yard work, folding the clothes out of the dryer, answering RSVPs.

People enter into this deep, mutual relationship (a marriage) with these almost incompatible ideas— They think that they can remain independent if they want to; but they *also* believe that they will be deeply and intimately connected to another person in almost everything that matters.

Turns out that the tension between the independent self and a committed union not only describes the complex, blessed relationship we call marriage, but it also describes the Holy Trinity of God.

How are we to understand the Trinity? The word doesn’t appear in the Bible, and yet, it has been a Christian mainstay.

Since the early centuries of the Christian church¹ and especially in the Eastern Orthodox branch, there has been a relational (or social) understanding of the Trinity. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are distinct but not divided² persons in whom the one God is revealed. It is as if God is engaged in a deeply inter-personal experience. Some have said that the Trinity of God is like a charming, eternal, three-partner dance in the round. As the swirling dance requires the partners to hold and support one another, compliment and respond to one another, and as the dance cannot be done without all three moving together, so is God’s eternal will and purpose only accomplished and known as the three are one and the one are three. God is Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of all.

The Trinity is the Rosetta Stone of Christian social thought.³ Humanity was created for relationship, even intense relationship. Our capacity to give and receive love reflects (perhaps poorly reflects, but nevertheless reflects) the fundamental capacity for love and relationship that is the very nature of Almighty God—God, who is the eternally related Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, whose very being is, as the great Augustine has said, a trinity of the Lover, the Beloved, and the Love itself, inseparable.

At the end of Matthew’s gospel, in words that have special significance because of their placement there, the disciples are commissioned by the risen Christ to baptize the nations in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We who are not

Jews, but have been evangelized (and baptized) into belonging to God, should take special notice. Our place in the heritage of God's people is named with the names of the Trinity. Jesus' invitation to go to the nations, to welcome others in baptism, and to teach as we have (ourselves) been commanded has Trinitarian form. Go. Welcome. Teach. And this trinity cannot be understood apart from a relationship, connection, and presence. Jesus promises, "Remember, I am with you to the end of the age." So the Trinity of God describes our baptismal, covenantal relationship with God and gives focus to how we are to be related to others (all nations) of the world.

When we are able to recognize the extraordinary blessing of our place in the heart of God, we may express our joy with the words of Psalm 8. "O Lord, how glorious is your name in all the earth!" And, in that name, we become theologically bound to what we understand God is doing. You have made us like yourself—a little less than God, says the Psalm; you have given us charge over what God has already conceived and done in creating us and the world. We have this unique role in seeing things through: what God intends.

The social model of the Trinity of God and the tenderness of the connection-with-God Psalm 8 proclaims and the promise of presence that Jesus gives as Matthew's gospel ends all point to the same thing. God is loving, and never unloving. The God who stands behind the social Trinity is not distant, unknowable, or disaffected. The Trinitarian God is engaged, deeply committed to what is mutual and can be shared, tied to belonging and to a great steadfastness.

A committed Trinity is not only what God does; the Trinity is who God is. God is love.

I am sure most of us love happy endings. It's tempting to leave our discussion of the Holy Trinity of God right there with a celebration of God's extraordinary goodness. But we declared that today was to be a disastrous Sunday, so that we might build the service around a special offering for disaster assistance to Joplin, Missouri, Birmingham, Oklahoma, and other places a terrible tornado season has effected, where the flooding of the Mississippi and Red Rivers have occurred, and where disasters have occurred in other lands.

How, we might ask, does a Holy Trinity of interconnected love connect with sadness and loss? If God is (figuratively) a swirling dance in the round, how right can it be to dance so close to people's graves?

Disasters do not confirm God's love so much as they provide the great test of God's love. Is God's love real? This is the profound struggle which we cannot put aside: Where is God (this triune God!) when I hurt?

In this light, we cannot forget that God's Trinity includes the Cross. The Trinity encompasses the Son who was crucified, the Father whose son was condemned and killed; and the Spirit who was surrendered from the cross in agony. The Trinity is a trinity of deep, mutual, and personal love, but it is love given its character in a crucible. The social model of the Trinity of God has to withstand the demands put on it by what is dangerous, terrible, and unloving. Over and over, in these troublous situations, God's goodness has been affirmed in the call we believers hear, the call to mutual care and compassion in the face of suffering. Compassion is essential. It is essential to the reality of a social Trinity of God; it is also our essential response.

Let's return for a moment to thoughts about marriage and thoughts about independence

and sharing responsibility. In a marriage (and this is true of any intense relationship—deep relationships like a friendship, the family, the church)— we participate best when we are able to give of ourselves to sacrifice and share, even to suffer for and with the ones we love. Compassion, when we break the word down, means to suffer with.

This does nothing to explain why disasters occur and why people suffer. But it teaches us that because we are (as God's people) caught up in the image of God, we cannot forget or forsake one another.

The Oxford don and Greek Orthodox Bishop Timothy Ware has said that human beings are called to reproduce on earth the mystery of mutual love that the Trinity lives in heaven.⁴ This may seem to be a colossal task, a threat to our independence, and overwhelming to our sense of responsibility. God's call often seems to be too much, all the better to inspire us to reach!

We were all baptized in the name of the Trinity, and we bear that distinctive image of God, an eternal relationship of persons. Unless our belonging to this God is rejected, we cannot help but be compassionate. An offering to assist victims of natural disasters is a start. It is a start and a continuation of our Lord's commissioning invitation (in Matthew) to "Go into all nations, welcoming, and teaching obedience; for I am with you." It is a way to live out the Trinitarian existence on which our life in the church's fellowship and our communion as God's people is formed.

The offering will go to provide cleaning products and personal hygiene products that can be packaged and sent to places where disasters have occurred. The point, of course, is to be active in our care for people in need. To stand with them. Because compassion is more than Presbyterians being nice and kind. It is a bold expression of the personal God we worship. Do you expect there to be any change in your level of independence? Perhaps not. But there are responsibilities to share.

Notes

1 The Council of Constantinople was held in 381 C.E.

2 Attributed to John of Damascus.

3 Nancy Percy, *Total Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2005), 132-134.

4 Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's, 1979), 39.