

God the Relationship

When I was in seminary one of my professors was known for a couple of lectures he did analyzing popular television shows. One lecture was entitled “Six-gun Theology” and looked at how westerns represented a distortion, he believed, of Christian theology, especially with their view that evil always came from the outside, literally rode into town on a horse, and the townspeople, led by the morally pure sheriff, banded together to drive evil out and preserve the purity of the town. He argued that this view of evil, coming in from “out there” was a misunderstanding of the notion that evil actually lurks within all of us. Evil, according to Christian tradition is far more like the wolf in the Native American parable. The parable that tells of a grandfather who is talking with his grandson and he tells the boy that there are two wolves inside of us which are always at war with each other. One of them is a good wolf, which represents things like kindness, bravery and love. The other is a bad wolf, which represents things like greed, hatred and fear. The grandson stops and thinks about it for a second then he looks up at his grandfather and says, “Grandfather, which one wins?”

The grandfather quietly replies, “the one you feed.”

Evil, my professor argued, is not something that only exists “out there”, it exists within all of us as does good, and we have to decide which part of our nature to nurture.

His other lecture looked at shows like MASH and Mary Tyler Moore and peeled back the layers to reveal that what they were really about was family, not the way the Waltons was obviously about family, but in a subtler, more Disneyesque way. So they had parental figures, think Lou Grant or Colonel Potter; taunting siblings, think Mary and Ted or Hawkeye and Frank; and they tended to follow plotlines that created tension in the family that ultimately got resolved through mediation, care and – dare we say it – love. And so every Saturday night we could sit on our couch and get family counseling while eating ice cream and not even know it.

In 1973 on Saturday nights on CBS, the lineup was “All in the Family”, “MASH”, “Mary Tyler Moore”, “Bob Newhart” and “The Carol Burnett Show”, all of them, at their core, about family. In my family, the Saturday night ritual of spaghetti followed by peppermint bon bon ice cream in front of the television was almost as sacred of a ritual as going to the Lutheran Church on Sunday morning. This was thousands of dollars of counseling every week, delivered with humor and insight and, most importantly, we could benefit from the therapy without any of us actually having to talk about our feelings! We actually didn’t need to talk at all.

And television shows today are not that different, peel back the layers, uncover the underlying themes and from all the incarnations of NCIS to Blue Bloods and Grey’s Anatomy even to most of the reality shows on, at their core they are about family – not the literal hardly ever exists nuclear family, they are about the deeper family we

all need, relationships that nourish, challenge and push us, even as they frustrate us to distraction.

We are, by nature and design, created for relationships. In fact our very survival depends on them. And while relationships don't cure every ill, when we engage in them with honesty and, most importantly, with vulnerability, they keep us from the destructive tendencies of self-deception and isolationism. Relationships, done well, help us feed that good wolf inside.

In fact, in the Christian tradition we believe our relational nature is so important that we have as one of our core beliefs a God whose very existence is a relationship, for the truth embedded in the concept of the Trinity – and it is Trinity Sunday – is that the very nature of God is relational. We might even say that God only exists in relationship, through relationship, not only in God's beautifully poetic threeness, but also in relationship to us.

But I want to make this even more concrete, because not only is **God's** very existence defined relationally, **ours** is as well.

Have you ever uttered words like, "Without you, I am nothing"? "Without you I feel lost?" Have you ever felt more complete because you were in a relationship that seemed to open up parts of your personality that you didn't even know existed? Have you ever felt that you were less than who you could be because a relationship had been lost or damaged? The singer/songwriter Chris Smither has this beautiful line about losing one of these life-giving relationships. He wrote:

I used to be half the whole of you and me
Now I'm the limit of half a man

These kinds of relationships give us life, they make us into better people and the beauty is that they can be relationships with almost anyone or anything, they are not limited to romantic relationships by any means. We can find life-giving relationships with a child, your child or not, a parent, a co-worker, a friend, a pet, a place, a tree – I swear I am developing a relationship with an oak tree... and with God – named or unnamed. One of the reasons the poetry of Rumi is so compelling is because it is both about human love and love of God. Or consider the George Harrison song "Long, long, long" where he wrote,

It's been a long, long, long time
How could I ever have lost you?
When I loved you

It took a long, long, long time
Now I'm so happy I found you.
How I love you.

So many tears I was searching
So many tears I was wasting.

Now I can see you, be you.
How can I ever misplace you?
How I want you.
Oh I love you.
You know that I need you.
Oh I love you.

He is not writing about a person, he is writing about God.

And this notion that the core of who God is, is a relationship, and the centrality of our own existence is relationship leads us to the recognition that at the center of all we do here at St. John's needs to be relationships. It needs to inform how, where and why we do outreach, it needs to drive our social justice ministries. It even needs to be at the center of such mundane tasks as painting walls and pulling weeds.

And it needs to be the core of our work with children and youth.

One of the things I tell Sunday School teachers each year is that one of the essential truths of teaching Sunday School is that the children and youth will not always remember the lesson, but they will remember you. And so, when faced with a choice of focusing on the lesson or focusing on the relationship, always, always choose the relationship. This core belief drives all our youth ministries as well. Take something like the pilgrimage or trips to Guatemala. These are expensive, time-consuming endeavors, and they are worth every penny and every second because of the opportunity they give us for creating relationships, among peers and across generations. In all of the ministry we do that relates to children and youth we strive to keep this at the center, which is why you don't need to be a theologian to teach Sunday School, but you do need to love kids.

Here is the deep, dark secret, supported by research, about why most of you are here. You are here because there are other people here that you want to be with. This is as true of adults as it is true of youth.

And so, in a few minutes when I ask the teachers and choir dinner leaders and pilgrimage leaders to stand, know that what we are recognizing them for is this essential work, not of teaching, leading or cooking and doing dishes, but of creating community and doing their best to forge relationships that not only reflect who we are at our core, but also reflect the very nature of God.

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