

**Genesis 1:1 - 2:4a**

**First Sunday after Pentecost: Trinity Sunday**

**June 4, 2023**

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I've been thinking a lot about relationships lately. Specifically, about the ways we are shaped and changed by the people we rub shoulders with, the people we choose to be near, and those who by happenstance are part of the daily worlds we inhabit. I've been thinking about families and marriages and friendships. In the last weeks of my mother's life, her world got very, very small - just her bedroom, a few chairs, and the flower-filled view of her patio. But her world also was revealed to be vast, unknowably large, as people streamed in to sit in one of those chairs and talk with her about art, about a small group they were in together, about poetry, about shared memories going more than seventy years, back to first grade or to just a few years ago. People who couldn't come in person wrote emails and texts and letters, and called to say, "My life is different because of you." Her marriage, her art, our family, her work, a network of friends both deep and wide, all these ways that she knew and maybe didn't know how she was a pebble in a pond, rippling out.

We have some ways of talking about the meaning of relationships; some better than others. "Ubuntu" is the Bantu, South African word for the idea that our humanity takes shape in community; often people define Ubuntu by saying, "I am because we are." I can't know who I am without seeing myself as shaped and changed by you, and you can't know who you are without seeing yourself through the prism of your relationships and contacts. In the *African Journal of Social Work*, the idea of Ubuntu is explained with this added depth as "a collection of values and practices viewed as making people authentic human beings ... an authentic, individual human being is part of a larger and more significant relational, communal, societal, environmental and spiritual world." We become authentic humans, or to borrow from The Velveteen Rabbit, we become real, by being in the world with others. We become ourselves, whether we are handled with love or roughly, by rubbing up against each other.

Not here for children's books or social psychology? Another way of talking about relationships is to speak of quantum physics and entanglement. It seems, scientists say, that tiny subatomic particles like photons and electrons can become entangled with other photons or electrons, and then demonstrably show that when something happens to one particle it impacts the other even when separated by great distances. There are too many scientists in this congregation for me to go much further, so let me revert back to my comfort language of poetry. As it turns out, I'm in good company here. Physicist Niels Bohr said of subatomic physics, "When it comes to atoms, language can be used only as in poetry. The poet is not so concerned with describing facts as with creating images and establishing mental connections." So the image or hoped-for mental connection here is that deep down every last bit of us is intertwined and connected, whether you and I understand the science or not. And we are changed and shaped by these tangled-up lives.

The preacher, like the poet, is also not so concerned with describing facts as with creating images and establishing mental connections. For the preacher, especially when it comes to preaching about the Trinity, language can be used only as it is in poetry. You see, we

have some ways of talking about God; some better than others. And the Trinity is one of those ways. It's hard to talk about God, and I think that's one of the reasons that it's actually helpful that it's hard to talk about the Trinity. There are more ways to walk into the realm of heresy when tackling this idea than there are ways to get it "right." This is why even the Biblical readings appointed for this day are a bit random; we're just looking for places where all three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, get named whether the readings hang together or not. And, of course, if you want to include Hebrew Scripture, this task of literally naming all three outright is impossible, as you have to infer Jesus' presence; layering his activity in the Word as the Word.

But there is something about this long, beautiful poem of creation that does move us toward an appreciation of the nature of the Trinity. You might want to begin by leaning into that plural phrase "our image ... our likeness." But mostly, I want to lean into the idea that the opening chapter of Genesis establishes that all of it, all of everything, is created with the fullness of things in mind. Every living thing is created in dialogue with every other thing; the days and the elements of creation are stitched together forming a world of interrelated beauty. The world as we understood it then, as we know it now, and even as we continue to know more, is a world of intricate and intimate relationships. The light and the dark and the plants yielding seed and the swarming waters and every winged bird and creeping thing and humankind, all created in communion with the rest of creation and in communion with God. There is a kinship at the very heart of the world, at the very beginning of the story, yoking us together for better or for worse.

The best way to avoid heresies on Trinity Sunday, I was taught, is to avoid comparisons. I had a professor who forbade us from comparing the Trinity to water in its different forms of gas, liquid, and solid. The Trinity isn't like anything else because God isn't like anything else. But the Trinity is a relationship; God is who God is in relationship, a dance some have called it, the three indwelling, the three not ranking, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit existing in perfect, or complete, love and unity, an intricate and intimate relationship. So, maybe the Triune God isn't *like* our relationships, our marriages, families, circles of friends ... but maybe we are at our best when we see that relationship is at the core of God and at the core of our being and at the core of everything, all the way down to the subatomic level.

So, we could try to talk about the Trinity. Or we could realize that when we wonder about what it is between us, in the space between us that holds us together, creating a connection and a sense of being fully known, we are wondering about God and about that bit of God in us and between us. We could wonder about the mathematical possibility of three being one, or we could look around the created world and consider the mystery of how we become fully and authentically human in this fulsome world. We could think about doctrines and scripture, or we could imagine how we might best reflect the image of God through a love of everyone we encounter over a lifetime. We could spend some time thinking about relationships and how we are shaped and changed by them, knowing that we are made in the image of a most mysterious and wondrous relationship at the heart of it all.