

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for Trinity Sunday, May 30, 2010
Lessons: Amos 8:11-12, John 17:18-24 and Matthew 27:46

CURRENTLY CONNECTED TO . . .

Never before have people been so constantly connected to others, strangers as well as friends. A quiz I took recently informed me that I am not considered well connected by Generation X standards because I do not text or tweet; neither do I have an Internet connection from my cell phone. But the other day I exchanged messages with a friend in Kazakhstan as quickly and easily as with a friend in Cleveland and another here in Bridgeton. I now have friends I have never even met face to face, but I know about their jobs, their families, their thoughts on deep subjects, their passions for social change toward the alleviation of injustices, their fears, and their hopes. We are, indeed, friends who care about each other, and we are connected electronically.

Today, we can have nearly constant connection and information galore. Gone are the days when I would wonder what a word or phrase really meant or where a concept came from and would try to remember to look it up later. As often as not, I would forget to look it up later. Now, if I'm near a computer, Google is right there, and most of the time, Google can find the answers in milliseconds, even if the word or phrase is in a language I do not speak. And finding answers is not just a matter of the superficial — a short definition or a piece of trivia. The Internet provides explanations at varying depths of concepts in biology, economics, sociology, or any other discipline found in the university.

Never in the history of humanity have people who can afford them had so many clever and convenient ways to stay connected with others, often over great distances, though sometimes only with pseudonyms called “user names” or “screen names” to preserve anonymity. So, we have something new: groups of people who know each other's interests, ideas, and pet peeves but not each other's real names. So, if one of them died, the rest might never know. What, then, does it mean to be connected? And when do the benefits of being connected cross the line of addiction? Is there not a desperation in the folly of texting while driving? Surely the constant e-chatter has become an addiction when people risk their own lives and the lives of others just to keep up the chitchat, or when they ignore physically present friends, family, and teachers because they can't stop talking with distant people electronically. Like any other addiction, the compulsive need for e-chatter fails to satisfy no matter how much is consumed, even as it damages life, eating up time to be in a place by oneself or truly with other people or with God.

If Trinity Sunday serves any good purpose in the churches, I believe it does so by reminding us that being human and alive is a relational matter because we are created in the image and likeness of God, and for God, being God is a relational matter. God loves, and this day on the church calendar reminds us that God has always loved, that loving is the very nature of God and of God's own life. People say they do or do not believe in God, but what they mean is often very different from the biblical meaning of belief in God, which is trusting in God's love for us and, therefore, in God's promises for the life and salvation of this created world and its people. Merely choosing to believe *there is a God* is not believing in God any more than simply acknowledging that you exist amounts to being your friend.

"Father," Jesus prays, "I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world." Salvation comes from God's desire for relationship with us, and so our understanding of the mystery of God is an invitation to relationship, not a philosophical treatise. Jesus' glory is that of self-giving, redemptive love, not the false glory of power and prestige. God never takes away our freedom to respond, never takes over by force, and never turns us into puppets or slaves.

To understand even a little the mystery of the Triune God is to be brought, not to certainty about the "facts" of God, but to a state of wonder in which we realize both how little we know and how greatly we are loved. The place to find God and the place where a Christian understanding of God needs to begin and end is at the intersection of our human suffering and God's divine suffering. We are estranged from God and, therefore, from each other. Sin is alienation, and we suffer from that alienation itself as well as from all the cruelties it generates. What we do not realize in our estrangement from God is that God also suffers from our alienation because God will not stop loving us. The intersection of our suffering and God's suffering comes at the cross of Jesus.

In response to conversations with people in our church's book club, I read the novel, *The Shack*. I have varied reactions to it, but one I share with you now because it is crucial to changing our understanding of God and transforming the church's relation to the world. In the book, Papa, who appears first as female and later as male in Mack's eyes, represents God the Father. Crucial to me are the scars on Papa's wrists corresponding to Jesus' scars from his crucifixion. The theologian Jürgen Moltmann, in his book, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, proclaims the suffering of our God who loves:

The Son suffers death in his forsakenness. The Father suffers the death of the Son. So the pain of the Father corresponds to the death of the Son. . . . What happens on Golgotha reaches into the innermost depths of the Godhead, putting its impress on the trinitarian life in eternity.¹

In short, we must not try to make God's truth anything but that truth of redemptive love willing to suffer for us and with us embodied in Jesus crucified. The crucified Christ is the truth of God and about God in relation to us. All of our understanding of life dies and begins over at the cross. A doctrine of the Trinity apart from the humiliation and suffering of the crucifixion is and must be false teaching, and it will invariably serve human ambitions to prestige and power, leaving the broken un-mended and the scorned un-embraced.

Moltmann summarizes, "A God who cannot suffer cannot love either. A God who cannot love is a dead God. He is poorer than any man or woman."² Then he shares this from a poem of Robert Browning's:

For the loving worm within its clod
were diviner than a loveless God
Amid his worlds, I will dare to say.³

If a worm could love, it would be more divine than a god that could not. What the theology of the cross is doing is reclaiming the God of the Bible, of the prophets, of Jesus — the God who comes for us in love, with the highest regard for our freedom to love in response.

The alternative is the God of all power who has everything all worked out in advance to a nicety no matter how much suffering and humiliation people experience here on earth, no matter how senseless their lives are made to seem to them, no matter how unfair, brutal, and loveless their lot in life may be. The God of power does not enter into human suffering but justifies it, making it seem good and right and proper. Jesus' crucifixion says, "No!" to all explanations of people's shame and misery. Moltmann asks pointedly, "Does an explanation not lead us to justify suffering and give it permanence? Does it not lead the suffering person to come to terms with his suffering, and to declare himself in agreement with it? And does this not mean that he gives up hope of overcoming suffering?"⁴

Let me try to be pointed also. If as a Christian I rationalize suffering and grief in general, as somehow being okay with God and even good for God's purpose, will I not then excuse myself from any need for life-changing empathy with those doing the suffering? If it doesn't matter ultimately, how much do I need to care presently? If all's well that someday ends well, then am I not free to minimize empathy and compassion and seek my own goals? But God loves, and therefore God suffers willingly with and for us. The crucifixion of Jesus is the truth of God.

When I boot it up, my computer tells me I am "currently connected to," and then names the network. I think the questions for Trinity Sunday are, *How am I connected, to whom, and for what purpose, with what hopes and dreams?* Amen.

Notes added for the online version of the sermon manuscript:

1. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, p. 81. Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1993.
2. Moltmann, p. 38.
3. Robert Browning, “Christmas Eve,” V, lines 23-25. Quoted by Moltmann, p. 38. Moltmann goes on to say: “The living God is the loving God. The loving God shows that he is a living God through his suffering.” Then he quotes from M. de Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life*, p. 53: “For to us in our suffering God reveals himself as the suffering God. As sufferer, he demands our compassion, and on other sufferers he confers his own compassion. He envelops our anguish with his immeasurable anguish, which knows no end.”
4. Moltmann, p. 52.