

It's All About the Relationship

First Congregational United Church of Christ
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Texts: Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15

In 1980, many of us will remember, radical Iranian students seized the American Embassy in Tehran, and took 52 Americans who worked in the embassy hostage. One of those hostages was a student of mine at Columbia, and a neighbor on Riverside Drive in New York City. Not long after that event, a small delegation of Iranian students studying in the United States appeared in my office in New York. No, they hadn't come to take me hostage. I was new to my job as Middle East Executive for the United Church of Christ and Disciples of Christ, but somehow these students had learned about my religious and academic connections. I had studied and taught about Iran and Iranian religions at Columbia University, and now I was working for the church. These students thought that I might be helpful to them. They were not only deeply worried about the state of Iranian-American relations, but were even more concerned about the damage being done to Christian-Muslim relations. They had an interesting idea: they wanted to send a Christmas card to the American people in the form of a full-page ad in the *New York Times*, and they wanted me to check out what they had written with a view toward Christian sensitivities.

“We wish to extend our greetings and best wishes to the Christians of America,” their draft began, “on Christmas, the celebration of the birth of the Prophet Jesus.” I was, of course, brought up short by the Prophet Jesus reference, so as gently as I could, I told them that, though their intentions were laudable, calling Jesus a prophet would rub a lot of Christians the wrong way. Since in Islam Jesus is a highly revered prophet, along with Abraham, Noah, Moses, Elijah and other Old

Testament prophets as well as Muhammad himself, they couldn't imagine that calling someone a prophet would antagonize his followers. "Well, you have to understand the meaning of the Trinity to Christians," I said, and then I immediately regretted it, because these very serious students asked me to explain the Trinity. It's not easy. Muslims and other non-Christians are not the only people who struggle with the doctrine of the Trinity; they're joined by many, if not most, Christians.

In many churches, every worship service begins with what's called the Solemn Declaration: "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." I just used a version of this formula that gets away from gender specificity: "In the name of God the Creator, Christ our Redeemer, and the Holy Spirit our Sustainer." After the assurance of pardon in our services we sing the "Gloria Patri." "Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost." And at the conclusion of our worship services, I almost always say the benediction that closes Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, "May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all." During the course of baptisms, we ask the congregation to rise and affirm the most ancient Christian confession of faith: "I believe in God; I believe in Jesus Christ; I believe in the Holy Spirit." These are all statements of belief in the Trinity. They are an essential component of our identity as Christians. But though we frequently invoke the Trinity, we seldom really talk about it. Maybe we did in our confirmation classes, but for many churchgoers that's the last time they'll ever talk about the Trinity. By invoking it, but not talking about it, we risk reducing an important teaching of the church to a kind of mindless formula.

Well, today in the church calendar is Trinity Sunday, so if we're ever going to actually talk about the real significance of the Trinity, today should be the day. Note that I said "the significance" and not "the meaning." One of the reasons I

struggled with my answer to those Iranian students, and why so many of us have problems explaining the Trinity, is that we're looking for its meaning. But the Trinity—what it is, how it functions—is a mystery, and once you're able to explain a mystery, it ceases to be a mystery. It's in our nature to seek to explain mysteries, to resolve them. Maybe some of you, like me, enjoy reading murder mysteries. Imagine how frustrated we'd be if, having worked our way through a mystery, we ended up not knowing who did it, or why and how they did it. Not being able to explain a mystery is inherently frustrating. But the Trinity is by its nature an eternal mystery; the question of its meaning is never fully answered.

If that lack of resolution frustrates you, if you're uncomfortable with unresolved mystery, you're in good company historically. The church's realization that the Trinity is a mystery didn't keep the church fathers, and I use that male term advisedly, from trying to resolve that mystery. They proposed solutions, and then they fought about those proposed solutions. They literally fought. Blood was shed over this mystery.

But the Trinity, in the end, isn't something that can be explained or defined; the Trinity signifies something. It points to something that lies at the core of our faith quest. The doctrine, or teaching, of the Trinity doesn't explain itself; it tells us something about how God relates to us. There is a Buddhist insight that can perhaps help us here. Buddhists talk about the finger that points to the moon. We tend to focus on the finger rather than the moon to which it points. Think of the Trinity as the finger that points to the moon. The Trinity is a teaching, a doctrine, but the teaching points to something beyond itself.

The Trinity is all about relationship: about God's relationship with us. And relationships, as we all know too well, are complicated. Let me try a humble and personal example. You know me as Dale, or as Pastor Dale. Either, by the way, is

fine with me, and after next Sunday, it's just Dale, please. But for now I'm Dale to the rest of the world, and to you I'm your pastor. That's the primary way I am related to you; you know me as your pastor. My wife also knows me as "Dale," but trust me, she never calls me Pastor Dale unless she's teasing me. More often she calls me "honey," or "sweetie"—OK, I know, this maybe too much information. Not a one of you has ever called me "honey." And that's a good thing. Our relationship is different. My kids, on the other hand, call me "Dad," or when they're evoking childhood feelings, "Daddy." We never had the custom of having our kids call us by our first names. For us, it was the relationship that named us. Whether I'm Dale, or Pastor Dale, or honey, or Dad, I'm still the same person. But what I'm called signifies something; it says something about my relationship with the person who's naming me.

The Trinity is about our relationship with God. While it would be easier, less complicated, if that relationship were a one-dimensional, straightforward one-to-one relationship—one name, one manifestation of God—that wouldn't be a true description of how we experience God in our lives. Nor would it be true of how God experiences us. Relationships are complicated. The Trinity reminds us of that. The Trinity prevents us from entertaining any illusions that we can define God, and then try to control God with our definition. Muslims, by the way, have ninety-nine names for God, which is another way of saying that God is infinite.

But let's go back to that familiar formula whereby we invoke God as creator, redeemer and sustainer, or as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It's really not so much a statement of doctrine as it is the history of a relationship. When we invoke the Trinity, we remind ourselves that God created us, that each and every one of us, without exception, is a child of God. We remind ourselves that we have a tendency to stray, that we get so caught up in ourselves that we forget where we came from and whose we are, that our straying impoverishes us and grieves God. So God

reaches out to us to bring us home; God becomes one of us in Jesus. Jesus reminds us of God's unconditional love by committing the ultimate act of devotion, giving himself for us. It's the purest act of love imaginable: literally giving up your own being, emptying yourself, so that someone else can live. But God's love doesn't end there. We need to be sustained, to be inspired, to be brought together. And so we have been given an Advocate, one who continues to speak for and to us in our separation from God and from each other.

In our lesson from Paul's letter to the Romans, a passage that not so coincidentally on Trinity Sunday brings together all three members of the Trinity, there is this wonderful statement: "Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us." If you've experienced a lot of suffering in your life—illness, separation from loved ones, excruciating loss—you may be thinking, "You know, I'd trade a little less character for a lot less suffering." Perhaps someone has tried to console you, or you've tried to console yourself, by saying or thinking, "This is how God is testing me." It's not such a loving image of God, is it? It suggests that God is like a sadistic drill sergeant in our earthly boot camp. "Shape up. This is good for you."

But if your experience has been anything like mine, at the most difficult times in my life it's not my own strength that gets me through, it's the love of God that I experience in community, in relationship. It's the loving arms of others who've carried me through.

On this Trinity Sunday, don't think of the Trinity, that mysterious "Three-in-One," as a difficult abstraction or a theological puzzle. Think of the Trinity as God, the God of love who comes to us in a way that relates to us, that relates to us where we are. It's the heavenly community that becomes our earthly family, the loving parent who brought us into being with all the hopes of any doting father or mother;

it's our brother and friend Jesus, who is with us and even gives his life for us; it's the spirit of creativity and community that keeps us going and continues to enliven us. It's all about the relationship, the most precious relationship we'll ever have.
Amen.