

Proper 6A 2017 Sermon Baptism

June 18, 2017

Have you ever been to a class reunion and met someone you hadn't seen in 10, 20, 50 years, and suddenly it seems like your relationship with this person is just as strong as it was all those years ago?

That's the way I felt when I met with Kaylyn and her family last night. It's been many years since they lived in Florence and were very active members of Christ Church and our youth group, and yet the minute I saw them last night, it was like it was just yesterday that they were sitting here in these pews.

It is SO good to have you back, and such an honor and privilege to be able to participate in Scarlett-Rae's baptism!

In my Trinity Sunday sermon last week¹, I mentioned that the ancient philosopher Aristotle theorized that there are ten qualities of all things, two of them being "substance" and "relationship." Substance is independent of, and unaffected by, anything else – a rock, for instance, is a substance. "Father" and "Son," on the other hand, are "relationship;" they are *dependent* on one another – one cannot exist without the other. Aristotle believed that things that are "substance," that are independent of, and unaffected by, other things, are of a higher order than things characterized by "relationship," which **are** affected by things outside themselves. Nouns are of a higher order than verbs. Aristotle believed that any concept of "god" would of necessity have to describe a perfect Being, above and removed from everything else, and unaffected by any other thing. Therefore, God would have to be substance, not relationship.²

But our Christian understanding of the Trinity contradicts Aristotle, for God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are in their *essence* **relationship**. In our Trinitarian understanding of God, *relationship* is of a higher order than substance; verbs are greater than nouns. God the Holy Trinity cannot primarily be known **objectively**, but rather is fundamentally known **subjectively**, *in relationship*. If we can, in any true sense, "know" God, it must be first and foremost a participatory, *relational* knowing – as a mother knows her child, or lovers know one another. And since we humans are created in the image and likeness of this relational God, we go against our own nature if we *objectify* any other person. And yet is that not what you and I do when we see someone only as "a Muslim," "a refugee," "a lesbian," "a drug addict," "a homeless person," "a conservative" or "liberal," and so on?

Richard Rohr suggests that the renewed interest in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity in the last century has come about in part because of our increased scientific understanding of the atom.² When I was a kid, I was taught that atoms were composed of three different things: protons, neutrons, and electrons – the basic building blocks of all matter. But that "static" model of the atom has fallen by the wayside as we have come to understand that what is really important is the

relationship between protons, neutrons, electrons – and all the other sub-atomic particles that keep being uncovered. Electromagnetic forces, nuclear forces, gravitational forces... **That's** where the **power** comes from – the *relationships between* the particles.

I read an article from *Scientific American* this past week titled, “China Shatters ‘Spooky Action at a Distance’ Record.”³ The article was about a phenomenon of quantum physics called “quantum entanglement.” (Now don’t go to sleep on me – this is actually VERY cool!) I don’t pretend to know all the science behind this, but the gist of the phenomenon of quantum entanglement is this: two particles can be “entangled” with one another, such that what happens to one particle instantaneously happens to the other particle – no matter how far apart they are. Chinese scientists have just proven that particles can be as distant from each other as an orbiting satellite is from the earth, and what happens to one entangled particle in the satellite happens to the other particle on earth instantaneously. There is a deep-seated, fundamental relationship between them. Theoretically, two entangled particles could be in two different galaxies, and still what happened to one entangled particle would happen instantaneously to the other.

The key word is **instantaneously**. *Faster than the speed of light*, which Albert Einstein said was impossible! In fact, Einstein famously called this theory of quantum entanglement “spooky action at a distance.” (I told you this was cool!) Yet in the decades since Einstein, quantum entanglement has been scientifically proven again and again – not only with paired photons, but paired molecules and even small diamonds!⁴ It seems that **relationship** is found at the very heart of God’s creation – and in relational manifestations that not even Einstein could wrap his head around! Maybe one of the reasons that it feels like Kaylyn and her family never left Christ Church is because all the time there has been some “spooky action at a distance” going on.

But I rather like to think of it in terms of the fact that, like the Trinity in whose image and likeness we are created, we are all called to participate in the Divine Flow of God’s love and life: the Father pouring himself into the Son, who receives the Father fully and pours himself into the Spirit, who receives the Son fully and pours herself into us, and we empty ourselves into the Father and into one another, and on and on in one, unending divine flow.

Now, entering into this flow of emptying oneself into another and receiving another fully necessitates a profound openness and vulnerability – which isn’t easy for us who identify so strongly with our egos, and love being in control! Richard Rohr points out that it is “much harder... to surrender to this flow than it is to have a strong moral stance on this or that, or to believe doctrines about this, that, or the other...”² And so we Christians have, for centuries, preferred to argue over doctrines and beliefs, or tried to prove ourselves morally superior, since that is far easier – and less costly to our egos – than entering into the Divine Flow, making ourselves totally vulnerable to God and one another.

I am convinced that it is a newborn's utter openness that makes baptizing a baby an especially holy, sacramental act. For a baby is totally vulnerable. Scarlett-Rae looks at us with eyes that do not judge, receives everything without blocking, and gives with total openness – a perfect example of how one participates in the Divine Flow of the Holy Trinity!

And yet, for the most part, we have made baptism into *substance* rather than *relationship*! In some Christian traditions, baptism is a sign of some moral decision a person has made, or some statement of belief a person has just professed. In either case, the emphasis is on our own human moral or doctrinal purity, *not* on joining the Trinitarian flow. In other Christian traditions, the heavy emphasis is on baptism as a sign of “washing away of sin” – a moral cleansing that the believer claims as a consequence of some price Jesus paid with his death. Baptism thus becomes the seal of the efficacy of Jesus' death to wash away sins.

But what if baptism is **not** about having made a decision to lead a godly life, or agreeing with some doctrinal statement about Jesus, or having one's sins washed away? What if, instead, Holy Baptism is about entering more consciously and fully into the flow of the Holy Trinity? Then the renunciations of evil in our baptismal liturgy become not moral acts, but a willingness to let go of anything that would separate us from relationship or block the divine flow of love and life; and the affirmations and prayers in the baptismal liturgy would become statements of our deep desire to remain in relationship with God and others, and stay open to that flow.

What if infant baptism is about drawing out a capacity that is already present in that child – a capacity to give and receive the divine flow in all vulnerability? What if parents and sponsors and all of us who reaffirm our baptismal vows and welcome and support Scarlett-Rae are in effect opening ourselves in vulnerability to that divine flow, so that the collective effect is one wide channel through which we all receive the divine flow **from** God and each other and pour it back **into** God and each other? What if all the water imagery in the baptism ceremony and the pouring of the physical water itself is an outward manifestation and symbol of that divine flow? What if, rather than being the sole recipient of Holy Baptism today, Scarlett Rae is not only a recipient but, in her infant vulnerability and openness, is a catalyst for widening the capacity of uninhibited Divine Flow in, through, and out from us all?

And what if our relationship with God and with one another is as intimate as quantum entanglement? What if whenever Scarlett-Rae smiles, not only do her parents smile, and God smiles, but something inside each of us who have been a part of her baptism today smiles, also – perhaps in a subtle, but no less entangled, way?

What if baptism is not about substance, but relationship: each of us opening the channels of our hearts in vulnerable, self-emptying love, until the collective flow changes not only us, but those around us, and perhaps even makes a difference to someone on the other side of the globe?

What if?

AMEN

¹http://christchurchcanoncity.weebly.com/uploads/2/4/9/8/24983166/trinity_sunday_a_2017_sermon.pdf

² Richard Rohr (with Mike Morrell): *Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation*, New Kensington, PA: Whitaker House, 2016

³ https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/china-shatters-ldquo-spooky-action-at-a-distance-rdquo-record-preps-for-quantum-internet/?wt.mc=SA_Facebook-Share

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Quantum_entanglement