

Trinity and Relationships Chapel, 12-2-2013

“It’s all about relationships.” This is the motto of Ro Foege, class of 1960. Now retired, Ro is a social worker who served in the Iowa legislature for many years. When I first met him more than four years ago, he said this to me—and he has repeated it over and over again. It’s a ritual between us, and it’s quite serious—for he means it and I believe it.

When I was in graduate school, a long, long time ago, almost in a galaxy far away, I became interested in the way that Greek philosophical concepts became important to the development of Christian theology. That interest led me to the specific debate within the Church about the Doctrine of the Trinity.

Generating a lot of theological energy during the third and fourth centuries, this debate was fierce: were most of us to read the rival explanations of the Trinity that were advanced during that period, we would be hard-pressed to see how they differ from one another, and yet, folks involved in that debate could see distinctions and differences that we cannot see; they could split hairs that we couldn’t even find. Especially scary is how violent the debate became: St. Athanasius, for example, a Bishop of Alexandria, was accused of flogging his clergy for harboring heretical beliefs about the Trinity.

I was fascinated by this debate. What does it mean to say that the Father is eternally begetting the Son? Or that the Son is eternally begotten of the Father? How different, really, is it to say that the Son is begotten (using the word *gennesis*) or that the Son is begun (using the word *genesis*)? Or that the Holy Spirit is eternally proceeding from the Father, but not from the Son? Or, better yet, what does it mean to say God is one in *ousia* but three *hypostases*? And how does the meaning change in Latin: one *substantia*, three *personae*.

[I have such wonderful memories of sitting at my carrel in the Library, reading Tertullian, Augustine, Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Basil.]

In my efforts to sort it all out, though, I think I missed the most important point—as did many of the third and fourth century theologians working on this issue. To search for precision in defining the Trinity is a classic instance of losing the forest for the trees.

They lived in a moment of crisis. They were struggling hard to define the right belief, *orthodoxa*, and, as so often happens, their quest to define became an all-out effort to identify and expel those who didn’t have the right belief—the heterodox, the apostate, the heretic. So many of the historically important documents begin with the firm proclamation: “I anathematize _____”—fill in the blank.

I have an old friend who’s a Zen Buddhist. He grew up in southern California, majored in something like the history of consciousness at UC-Santa Cruz back in the 70’s, then found himself doing sitting meditation, Za-Zen, in the San Francisco Zen Center. We met some years later in graduate school. We both enjoyed running and road racing, so early each Sunday morning, we’d take a long run together through Nashville. And we’d talk. While I was trying to work through the Doctrine of the Trinity, my friend Tom was striving to internalize the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths, including:

- Life is suffering
- Suffering comes from desire
- Suffering only ceases when we cease to desire

The Zen Buddhist, Tom taught me, believes that the root of our troubles is our focus on ego, on self. And the Buddhist believes this radically. We are, Tom said, not egos, not selves. We are not individuals, separate from one another or from anything else; but, by conceptualizing ourselves as individuals, we crave our own survival, we crave those things that ensure our own survival, such as food and shelter; we crave those things that ensure our access to food and shelter, such as money; and so on and so forth.

Most of Tom's lessons didn't really stick with me; it seemed a bit fanciful to think that I didn't exist as an individual. But one lesson did hang with me, in a dormant way. It was kind of a thought-experiment. Tom told me to imagine myself as a dot on a piece of paper, then draw lines outward to other dots to represent my relationships to others, and then to erase the dot representing me. "You are," he said, "not the dot, but the relationships."

I had not thought of Tom and our discussions of Zen for many years—until I was at a meeting of Lutheran College presidents in February. We were listening to a theologian, Darrel Jodock, share his understanding of the particular gifts that Lutheran higher education imparts. Jodock emphasized that in the Lutheran environment we brook no conflict between learning and religion.

In schools founded and supported by many religious communities, religion is understood to be a matter of beliefs—doctrines, if you will. Doctrines run a risk of conflicting with claims one might glean from one's learning. But, Jodock argued, Luther's great "breakthrough" was to realize that religion is not a matter of people developing right beliefs with which to approach God; Luther realized instead that the biblical message is of a God who takes the initiative to reach out to us, to repair a broken relationship, to come to where we are and dwell with us. God puts relationships ahead of beliefs. That seems to be the theme of that little passage from Hebrews that _____ read a moment ago. God has strived to build a relationship with us, reaching out to us through prophets and, finally, through the Son.

At that point in Jodock's presentation, I sat up with a start: I remembered my conversations with Tom on those long runs through Nashville; I remembered his asking me to imagine myself not as a thing but as a collection of relationships. And, incredibly, I remembered St. Gregory of Nazianzus, too, one of those theologians I loved to read. I recalled his insight, his final answer to his opponents:

"Father" is not a name which designates either an essence or an action, O mighty sages; it is the name of the RELATION in which the Father stands to the Son and the Son to the Father. For just as with us humans these names ["father" and "son"] make known a genuine and intimate relation, so in the case before us now they designate an identity of nature between the One who is begotten and the One who begets.¹

If we take our eyes off the individual trees, step back, and look at the forest, we can discern this truth in the doctrine of the Trinity: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are relationships. And just as Martin Luther realized in a momentous insight that God is best understood relationally, not doctrinally, we should take to heart that our lives are best framed as relationships. That's my takeaway from my many hours of study in my little carrel in the Vanderbilt library. And, of course, Ro Foege had beat me to it: "It's all about relationships, Darrel."

¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Five Theological Orations*, translated with an introduction and notes by Stephen Reynolds