

The *Koinonia* of God

sermon digest

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John 3:1-17

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The *New Yorker* (March, 2009) article appropriately titled “Hellhole” was an expose’ of the cruel and unusual punishment of the common practice in prisons of subjecting prisoners to solitary confinement. The author Atul Gawande was attracted to a 1950’s study of Rhesus monkeys by Harry Harlow, a professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin. Professor Harlow decided to raise his own crop of research monkeys rather than purchasing animals captured in the wild in India. To assure healthy research animals, he followed the protocols established for human infants in hospitals, providing adequate nourishment and comfortable cribs while maintaining strict separation of the animals to prevent the spread of disease. To the psychologist’s surprise, his domesticated monkeys were almost useless for study; they were consistently withdrawn, sometimes psychotic, and essentially autistic. But his failure opened the door for research into the cause of his socially disturbed monkeys. Harlow made the profound discovery that his baby monkeys were the victims of social isolation. Mental health and even physical survival were connected to social contact, especially the nurturing presence of a mother. While Harlow’s study sparked the beginning of the animal rights movement, it also initiated radical reformation in the institutional care of orphaned infants and children.

Gawande’s “Hellhole” applied the findings in Harlow’s study to imprisoned adults both in penal institutions and in the reports of POW’s. Associated Press correspondent Terry Anderson was taken prisoner by Hezbollah in Lebanon in 1985. After his release, he wrote his memoir “Den of Lions” about being held for some seven years mostly in social isolation. Anderson describes experiences of hallucination and the terrifying sense of total mental collapse. He often found that he was losing his ability to reason or to think, and he began to lose all control of his emotions, sometimes falling into deep depression with episodes of rage that would bring down the guards to add physical abuse to the experience of isolation.

We should not be surprised that Senator John McCain is one of the more adamant legislators in opposition to the torture of prisoners by the U.S. As a prisoner of war in Vietnam, McCain endured physical torture including two broken arms and dislocated shoulders, leading to serious physical disabilities; but he said that the more difficult torture was isolation. McCain fought the encroaching insanity by running through his mind the movies he could remember. Others turned to prayer, plotting escape, or fantasizing about revenge on their captors; but the general consensus of prisoners was that the most devastating punishment was the loneliness of isolation.

Persons thrive on koinonia, on community. The Greek New Testament word *koinonia* has been incorporated into our English language, especially the language of faith. It concerns relationship and describes the connections between persons in the family of faith in communion with God. But the fact remains, all living, sentient beings, especially humans, thrive on relationships. In isolation they withdraw from life, wither and die. So Gawande opened his article with a conclusion: “human beings are social creatures. We are social not just in the trivial sense that we like company, and not just in the obvious sense that we each depend on others. We are social in a more elemental way: simply to exist as a normal human being requires interaction with other people.”

As a result of Gawande’s article and the avalanche of discoveries which followed, a major reformation of prisons is in process. Riker’s Island, New York, has been exposed for special cruelty to youth offenders who have been regularly assigned to solitary confinement for relatively minor offenses. We might justly direct all of our attention today to the immorality of torture objecting to cruel treatment of animals and enemies as well as criminals. But the larger picture concerns the human nature that we share with many living creatures on earth. The loneliness of isolation attacks the very core of our being whether it comes from imprisonment or life situation.

The word *individual* that has been lauded as a statement of human freedom and courage especially in the myth of the American pioneer spirit distorts the reality of human existence. The individual is the undivided, indivisible self. Like the atom in the material universe, it is paraded as the basic building block of personhood. It has fostered the myth of Robinson Crusoe, the famous English novel by Daniel Defoe, that human beings are basically independent creatures who can thrive on

isolation. The more modern version was Tom Hank's 2000 movie "Cast Away" that more accurately describes the deterioration of the mind in the character's steady struggle with thoughts and even an attempt at suicide.

The seventeenth century cleric and poet John Donne describe the human condition: "No man is an island, Entire of itself, Every man is a piece of the continent, A part of the main. . . Any man's death diminishes me, Because I am involved in mankind, And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee." The Bardstown, Kentucky, Gethsemane monk Thomas Merton wrote his own version of *No Man Is an Island*, sixteen essays on the spiritual nature of the human life. The monastic ideal, it would seem, should magnify solitude and the joys of isolation in the monastic life. However he wrote, "True happiness is found in unselfish love, a love which increases in proportion as it is shared."

Love is expressed in relationship. Even self-love requires a division within oneself to distinguish "Me," from "Myself," and "I." If you have walked through the Valley of the Shadow of Death with the Psalmist, you know that the death of a companion, child, parent, or friend is not just about our grief over another's loss of life. It is a loss that cuts to the core of your self, in the biblical sense of the soul. When someone close to me dies, a part of me dies with her, and I am never again the same.

Our best source for the knowledge of God comes together in human experience. The Genesis story of creation describes the creation of human persons, male and female alike, in the image of God. The divine image seems to distinguish humans from the rest of creation and other living things. It has been identified as human intelligence, the spiritual nature, and even the physical appearance. Karl Barth was closer to the truth in finding the image of God in the essential relationship quality of the human persons. The ties that bind humanity, even in male-female polarity, are the essential ties that bind us to God. Human persons are incomplete in individual isolation. It is the human nature that ties us to God that we are persons who need persons to find the fulfillment of our personal being.

God thrives on koinonia. If we humans made in the divine image are driven by the power of love that reaches out to others and the power of love received from others, is this not the essence of the divine nature? I am aware that this is heresy. I have often been reminded that humanity made in God's image is likely to return the favor and create our own gods to please our own selfish wishes. But the danger of distortion and misunderstanding is the risk we take of reaching out to God. I must confess, I find nothing wrong with seeking the best that we know in human life as a model for understanding God. Rather than my own superficial assumption, I prefer to take the biblical sentence "God is love" as the most basic thing that we can say about God. To say that I need to love and to be loved is also the highest statement that I can make about myself. Like the humans made in God's image, God is more than a lonely individual being. God is love. As a loving God, like all of humanity, God thrives on relationship.

Perhaps you are beginning to wonder what all of this has to do with the story of Nicodemus in John 3. As a direct teaching of the text, perhaps the simple answer would be, "Very little." But today has been identified on the Christian calendar as Trinity Sunday, the day we celebrate the traditional Trinitarian orthodoxy of the Christian faith. As in the past, I take exception to the "traditional" orthodoxy of the Trinity, especially the atrocities committed in church history in the three names of Father, Son, and Spirit. But I have been moved by the rediscovery of the trinity by recent theologians who center their faith on the community within the nature of God. Essentially they are saying that God is *koinonia*. The traditional language of Father, Son, and Spirit magnifies the dimension of God that every human person can understand. God is community in need of relationship and best known in the interactions of persons in love for one another.

The third chapter of John has long been the center of the gospel message for Christians. Most of us have held in memory the sixteenth verse about God's love and the giving of his "only begotten Son" with the promise of eternal life. Nicodemus is one of the more fascinating characters in the Fourth Gospel, I might add, a Gospel known for its rich development of characters. This Jewish leader and Pharisee, who came to Jesus by night, reappears later to participate in a strategy session on what to do with Jesus and, after the crucifixion, to participate in the burial. John seems to suggest that Nicodemus became a disciple of Jesus. The conversation of Jesus with Nicodemus revolves around

the traditional persons of the Trinity: God, the Son, and the wind of the Spirit. Without any attempt to define the Trinity, the whole story is about the mystery of God. The epitome of the lesson about the salvation of the world comes to focus on John's commentary on the Nicodemus conversation, "God so loved the world. . ." God's love for the cosmos leads to the gift of God's only begotten Son. John cannot speak of God apart from the interaction and loving relationships within God extended to the human family.

Jürgen Moltmann concludes: "It is only from the perspective of the trinitarian God that we can claim that 'God is Love,' because love is never alone. Instead, it brings together those who are separate while maintaining their distinct characters. From the perspective of the triune God, one can say, along with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'only a suffering God can help'" (sermon "The Triune God: Rich in Relationships").