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Bad Math  
John 16:12-15

It's summertime, and so we should all be taking it a little easy - so I'd like to begin with an easy question for us to ponder.

What is a person?

Not a human being, or a homo sapien, but a person. What makes a person a person?

It's a question that should have an obvious answer - we know one when we see one, and most of us would ourselves identify as persons, but try and put a definition on it. It's not so easy.

If we try to take it from a legal angle, we get into all sorts of complicated debates about what personhood entails. What capacities must a person have to be considered a person? Can a group of people be considered a person for the sake of liability? Does personhood confer certain rights or not, and if we deny them, are we denying personhood?

How about artificial intelligence? In 1950, Alan Turing invented a test in order to see if a human being could distinguish between another human and a computer. The Turing test is the earliest, but not only test to attempt to benchmark whether or not a computer could "think" for itself. And so what if it could? Like the HAL 9000 in 2001: A Space Odyssey, if a computer could think autonomously, would we consider that machine to be a person? Or must you have flesh and blood to be considered so?

See, a really easy question!

Needless to say, I have no expertise to weigh into the legal conundrums, nor am I an expert in computer science, but I do have a stake in trying to figure out what a person is, if for no other reason than I am a person. And as it turns out, it matters very much in Christianity what we think a person is.

It's not unlike one of the central and most complicated theological questions that Christians have wrestled with since Jesus himself lived, and so bear with me as I ask you to hold an equally difficult question in your head. What makes God, God? Yes, on this nice June morning, I'm going to have to beg your pardon and ask us all to do some heavy theological lifting for a few minutes. I promise nothing bad will happen.

More specifically, I want us to think about the concept of the Trinity. How can it be that God is One, and that God is also Three: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? We accept the Trinity as what it is we're all supposed to believe in, and we affirm it when we say the creeds, but how is that possible?

The Trinity is an enormously challenging idea for our modern brains, because it offers us a poorly constructed, unsolvable math problem to deal with. God is completely one, and God is completely Three. Three is one, and one is three. When people try to explain the Trinity, we usually attempt to lean towards one side of the math equation or the other. We could say that God is one, but has three natures, or three forms of the same thing, like liquid water, ice, and steam. Or we could go the other way, and say that God is three, but just seems like one. But we have a hard time holding both together as both completely, unassailably true - one number has to be the reality, and the other number mere metaphor.

I have no quick or convenient way to explain this to you. It's just bad math, totally unresolvable. And as central as this idea is to Christian theology, theologians through the ages have mostly stayed away from explaining what the Trinity is, but instead focused on why the Trinity matters. Even in the Gospel text today, Jesus attempts to make no explanation of the fact that God is simultaneously the Father whom he listens to, himself whom the Spirit glorifies, or the Spirit who speaks the Father's will. There's no neat theological explanation. Instead, Jesus describes who God is as a series of interconnected relationships.

To a Christian, to us, God is not God without God's "threeness" as part of God's oneness. God is fundamentally relational. Not only does God have a relationship with us and the whole world, but paradoxically, God has a relationship with himself in the form of the Trinity. The three persons listen to each other know each other fully, and work in perfect harmony. The Oneness of God and the Threeness of God are indivisible because God is relationship, and God cannot be God without relationship.

Relationship is as central to God's identity as wetness is to water. It's just who God is.

So why does it matter? Here's where we get back to the first point, about what makes a person a person, and why we would bother to have this conversation at all to begin with. We are made in God's image, and at the core of God's being and image is relationship. And so relationship is as central to who we are as to who God is. God, in our Christian claim, is God in relationship, and not isolation. My claim is that likewise, you cannot be a person in isolation. To be a person is to be relational.

Or put another way, you are a person because you are in relationship with other people.

There's a South African concept called Ubuntu, which Archbishop Desmond Tutu leaned on heavily in the work of deconstructing apartheid, the systematic oppression of Black Africans in South Africa. He says that "Ubuntu [...] speaks of the very essence of being human. [When we] say [that a person] has ubuntu," then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, "My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours." We belong in a bundle of life. We say, "A person is a person through other persons."

A person is a person through other persons. It's part of the fabric of being a person, and it's more than mere biology. It is that at our core, we only can be who we are because of and through other people, and if we deny that, if we really think that we are islands unto ourselves, we deny an essential piece of our personhood.

Seeing as how it's graduation season, the event of a graduation is a central example of the importance of seeing our identity as persons as relational. Whether your kindergartener is moving into elementary school, or you've just graduated for the last time with your PhD, the setting of a ceremony puts together in one place, the people, and the relationships that made you who you are. Peers. Teachers. Family in the audience. Those that helped, and even those that hindered. You can't make it through Pre-K or a post-doc without the network of other people making you in to what you are, and if any of those relationships changed, you would be a different person.

Look around you now. You are surrounded by the people who not only make GPC who we are together, but have influenced your life in ways that you may not be able to identify. Think of your friends, your family, and your co-workers. You are who you are; you are a person, through those other people. And not only them because they are people through other people, and on, and on, and to quote Dr. King, "we are caught up in an inescapable web of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

God is relational. People are relational. There is no other way. This is not a "we should be relational, because God wants us to be." It's not an ideal to strive for. It just is, and we can acknowledge it, or we can pretend like we don't need other people or that we're not connected, but that we're just pretending.

Perhaps that's the option we're given, to decide if we want to acknowledge that reality. Because it comes with consequences. We can't look at our neighbor and say, well, that's just what's happening to them. Not my worry. We can't look at news halfway around the world and say that it's no concern of ours. What happens to them happens to us, and

what happens to us happens to them. What we do matters not only for ourselves, but for everything and everyone.

Everything matters, and everything is connected. Our private lives and public lives alike would be served well to remember that. A kind word has a ripple effect far past the end of its sound that fosters creativity and joy. A forgotten piece of trash ends up floating in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. A child or a grownup is brave and stands up to a bully and it's not just their life that's changed. A leader helps give the resources for somebody else to succeed.

There's a weight to that - the connectedness - and there is also a deep joy. Again, Desmond Tutu: "A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are."

Our strangely Trinitarian, relational God has managed to make for us a world in which every strand of existence touches every other strand of existence, and every person is related to every other person, and it makes for a beautiful world.

What makes a person a person? Other people do. We do. You are part of an indispensable fabric, and that is worth celebrating. Amen.