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# Everything's Relative

2 Corinthians 13:11-13

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on June 19, 2011, by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

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I want to tell you about three people I've talked to recently whose lives I find instructive.

The first is Baxter. Baxter's a pilot. His life as an undergraduate was a daily process of trying to hold together his increasing confidence in his own skill and future in the air force and his chronically burdensome and embarrassing family relationships. He couldn't invite his father to his graduation because he couldn't trust him to behave, he hasn't seen his elder sister for years because her mental health has been so up and down, and he longs to be able to communicate with his younger sister but she seems to feel he's betrayed the family by moving away to go to college and graduate school. The one thing he adores is to strap himself into the cockpit of his plane, and head up into the freedom of the open skies and the far horizon. That feels like the only place in the world where he can relax and where his chaotic family can't poison his life.

The second person is Shannon. Shannon had a background in engineering. She was brilliant at getting machines to work and fixing things around the house. She was always pursuing a project or drawing up plans for something new to construct in her garage. She never quite turned all her technical expertise into a career. But then she decided to become a personal coach. She worked with a technique for helping people get past the blocks in their imagination and imagine their own success. After a couple of years she dropped out of coaching and went back to making things in her garage. When I asked her why, she said, "For a while there I got to thinking that you could fix people as easily as you could fix metal or wood. But it turns out people are harder to fix than things."

The third person is Clark. Clark went on a Spring Break mission trip. He was keen to go because he'd always felt powerless in the face of the poverty of much of the developing world and he was delighted to have the chance to do something practical about it. I asked him if he'd found the trip rewarding, and whether he felt he'd made a contribution to addressing poverty. He said, "Actually, the biggest part of the trip was the people I traveled with. I thought we were going to help poor people, but in the end we spent most of our time with each other, and what I found out about myself was from the people who saw me first thing in the morning and last thing at night. In some ways it's a disappointment, but in another way I found something important, even if it wasn't what I was looking for."

What Baxter, Shannon and Clark have all been discovering is that when we want to score some quick victories in life, we try to keep things practical, and make sure people stay at arm's length. Once we let human beings, their fragility, foibles, and failures get too involved, we quickly start to lose control of things. The trouble is, human beings are also where the joy lies. We can accumulate technological or practical or tangible successes, but what we really crave is fulfillment in our relationships. The things that matter most we can't get right on our own.

Let me give some examples. Take possessions. We can hide away from the clumsiness or the hurt of other people by putting what money we have into wall-to-wall TVs, state-of-the-art kitchen appliances, stylish and comfortable modes of transport and breathtaking clothes. But where's the joy in having a car unless you've got someone to drive and see? Where's the fun in having a television unless you've got someone to talk to about what you've been watching? Where's the interest in having a nice kitchen unless you've got someone to share food with? Possessions aren't a protection or an escape from relationships. They're transitional objects to add dimensions to relationships.

Or take beauty. There's nothing like a magnificent sunset stretched out across a smooth and somnolent ocean. But don't you want to tell someone about it? It's wonderful to see a handsome face, but, in the end, people aren't for looking at – they're for talking to. Beauty isn't an absolute or abstract thing – it lies in the

configuration of rawness and artifice, in the balance of nature and nurture, in the way people fit into their surroundings.

And perhaps most poignant of all, take suffering. You might think pain is about the body, about medication, about different forms of alleviation and avoidance. But so much of pain and grief is really about how we relate to other people. Sometimes it's *caused* by a relationship, by a betrayal or a bereavement or a broken heart. Sometimes it's the opposite, and a relationship is the only thing that gives us courage to keep going through a time of grief or suffering, or even become the key dimension of our recovery. Whichever way, suffering is inconceivable without relationship. Suffering is perhaps our biggest form of isolation – but also our biggest proof of the centrality of relationship in our lives.

All of these insights find their true significance on this particular Sunday of the year, which we could call the day when the church celebrates the power, importance, indispensability, and everlasting quality of relationship. Trinity Sunday celebrates that God is three persons in one substance. In other words, God isn't a thing, an achievement, an edifice, a piece of technology, an impressive sight, even a dazzling light or a blazing fire. God is a relationship. God is a relationship of three persons, so wonderfully shaped towards one another, so wondrously *with* one another, that we call them one, but so exquisitely diverse and distinct within that unity that we call them three. But that shape has a direction, a fixed purpose, an orienting goal. The life of the Trinity is so shaped, not simply to be in perfect relationship in itself, but to be in relationship with us. Those are the two dynamics that lie at the center of the universe: God's perfect inner relationship, and God's very life shaped to be in relationship with us through Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. There isn't anything in God that isn't relationship.

There's a famous story of a public confrontation between a scholar and an elderly member of the audience to which he was speaking. "A well-known scientist (some say it was Bertrand Russell) once gave a public lecture on astronomy. He described how the earth orbits around the sun and how the sun, in turn, orbits around the center of a vast collection of stars called our galaxy. At the end of the lecture, a little old lady at the back of the room got up and said: 'What you have told us is rubbish. The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise.' The scientist gave a superior smile before replying, 'What is the tortoise standing on?' 'You're very clever, young man, very clever,' said the old lady. 'But it's turtles all the way down!'" [Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*]

That's what Christians discover in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. It's relationship all the way down. This is an incredibly difficult point to grasp. Most of us have huge resistances to allowing this discovery to affect our lives in any meaningful way. I want to pause a moment to consider why we get so nervous about it.

Think about the process of writing a will. Most of us delay, postpone, prevaricate and deny in the face of such a responsibility. It makes us think about our own death, which is a reality few of us wish to dwell on. But it also makes us focus hard on two other realities, which are also uncomfortable, and hard consider for very long. The first is the real extent, quality, and value of our personal possessions and assets. It's a cliché to say we can't take these with us, but it's only a cliché because it's a truism that needs repeating over and over again. Why do we put so much store by things that don't last forever? Why do we sacrifice so many relationships and so much trust in order to acquire more material security? Writing a will doesn't take long if all we have is what we need. Writing a will only takes a long time if we have things we don't need to have.

The second thing that makes us uncomfortable about writing a will is reflecting on the relationships a will requires. What about the brother I no longer talk to? What about the daughter who married the man I felt was unworthy of her? What about the former spouse I deep down feel I could have treated more graciously? Can leaving such people money, possessions, or even a meaningful trinket, really make anything better after we've gone? If we're so keen to make things better, why don't we set about doing so now, face to face, while we really can?

What writing a will shows us is how little we truly trust relationships and how eagerly we spend our lives looking for hard currency to convert relationships into. The things our culture most values are what we might call transferable symbols that can only be acquired through relationships but don't somehow entirely depend on them. Money is the most obvious one, but there are others. A university degree is certainly one of the most significant. A good reputation is possibly the most telling one of all. A good reputation is all about relationships. But what we want is a tidy résumé. A résumé is a sign of the ways our culture expects us to turn all our working relationships into self-explanatory glittering accomplishments.

Before we too quickly bewail all such translation as cynical and manipulative, notice that this principle – of turning fragile relationships into reliable possessions – lies close to the heart of human civilization. That's what institutions are made of. The problem of writing a will is a microcosm of human civilization: how do you translate something of value into something that can survive death and distrust and decay? How do you turn delicate relationships into something you can keep? That's exactly what institutions do. That's what law codes do. That's what professions do. Laws, professions, and institutions codify the wisdom that has arisen from human interactions over decades and centuries, and turn it into the best practice that humans can aspire to. We have a word for following this approach to life. We call it being responsible. We call it being prudent.

But here's the crucial point. That's what *our* lives are like. Constantly trying to turn relationships into something more tangible, more reliable, more predictable, more transferable. But that's not what *God's* life is like. *God's life is the complete opposite.* God's life is the 180° reversal of what we spend all our energies trying to bring about. *God's life is constantly turning the tangible, the predictable, the reliable, into fragile, fallible, fickle, relationships.* That's what we discover in Jesus. Jesus' coming, Jesus' ministry, Jesus' dying, Jesus' rising again are all showing us that there's nothing God wants besides us. And Trinity Sunday reminds us that there is no residue in God beyond the relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There is no solid rock, no lengthy beard, no gilded throne, no weighty scepter detachable from the interdependence of the three persons. It's relationship all the way down. All the way down. Hear the echo? All the way down-----n.

God is turning reliable dust into fragile flesh. It's the wrong way round. It's God's way round.

God is turning the economy of gold into the ecology of grace. It's the wrong way round. It's God's way round.

God is turning the predictability of punishment into the adventure of forgiveness. It's the wrong way round.  
It's God's way round.

God is turning death and taxes into healing and eternal life. It's the wrong way round. It's God's way round.

God is turning the wood of cruel execution into the reconciled glory of restored companionship. It's the wrong way round. It's God's way round.

We want to turn relationships into something more substantial, more reliable. God turns the reliable and the substantial into relationships. Because God is a relationship. That's what God is – three persons in such perfect relationship that they are one substance. There isn't anything else. That's all there is. That's what we could call "God's will."

John the Evangelist, the author of the Fourth Gospel and the three letters of John and the Book of Revelation, lived out his days on the island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea. One day, one of his followers came and spoke to him. "Master," he said, "Tell me one thing. I've always wondered, why is it that you always write about love? Why don't you ever write about anything else?" St John paused for a very long time, waiting for his disciple to work out the answer for himself. Finally, he answered the question. "Because," he said, "In the end, there isn't anything else. There is only love."

Only love, all the way down. Only companionship with us, all the way down. Only relationship, in the very heart of the Trinity. In the end, that's all there is. All the way down.