

Theological Frameworks for Relationship-Building-- by Joyce Ann Mercer

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I've been in a number of conversations lately with persons lamenting what they see as the de-valuing of relationships taking place in our time and culture in North America. Indeed, so many contemporary processes seem to undermine the focus and cultivation of relationships: we get our banking done through a machine rather than in an encounter with a bank teller; we fill our cars with gas rather than interacting with a service station attendant; we may even send email to a colleague down the hall instead of walking a few steps for a face to face conversation.

Whether or not such examples offer clear evidence that relationships are a "has been" phenomenon, unarguably our present context and time is one of rapid change regarding how we form and sustain our relationships. Just think about the use of the term "friend." A word that formerly referred to a personal relationship of some level of intimacy or significant connection, the term "friend" now appears in popular usage as a verb to refer to the social networking practice of giving another person access to one's Facebook page. The fact that people can say, "I have 520 friends" with whom they stay connected via digital media is only one small indicator of how the *meanings* of relationships are in flux. Consider the meaning of the term "followers," which until recently among Christians primarily referred to disciples of Jesus. Now among media-literate Christians, "followers" also signifies anyone who signs on to receive the "tweets" of another party using the online medium of Twitter to relate and communicate.

Various digital modes of relating, including online dating, "skyping" that allows persons across the globe to hear and see each other in a conversation, and blogging, all speak to new ways in which persons now may come to be in relationship with one another. Some have suggested that such virtual human connections taking place by means of social networking and other digital media are necessarily superficial. They view these connections between people as insignificant compared to face-to-face relationships. Certainly this critique has truth to it. But what I also see in the contemporary, vast array of how digital technology interfacing with our ways of being in relationships is an evolution in how and where people connect, not in their basic need to be in relationships and experience community. The possibilities include everything from "virtual relationships" that take place entirely online to relationships involving a lot of face to face encounter supplemented by digital connections, such as when parents use text messaging to communicate with their teenage children on the go. People in our time continue to experience a deep hunger for relationships, and many make use of the available new media to try to address that relational hunger, much like generations before them who engaged new technologies such as air travel and telephones for similar purposes.

Amid this contemporary context in which relational hungers are real, I offer a theological claim that *Christian faith is all about relationships*. That is, at the center of Christian theology is the God whom we experience through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit as God-with-us, God in ongoing relationship to the world God created, redeemed, and loves. The "curriculum" of Christian theology is embodied in relations, including our relationships with God, with those people nearest and most like us (family,

perhaps pastors or Christian educators, friends), and also with those most distant or different from us (strangers, persons of other races, persons living in different economic circumstances, persons of different genders, etc.). Through our relationships with other Christians, our faith takes form and is shaped; in our relationships with one another inside and beyond the church, our faith is lived out. Relationships, then, are at the heart of our faith and theology.

The above claim that Christian faith is inherently relational becomes particularly evident in three dimensions of Christian theology:

- **Incarnation:** The story of God-with-us through God's enfleshment in Jesus Christ is, at its heart, a relational narrative. Incarnation concerns the God who so deeply desires a connection with humanity that God is willing to risk everything to be in relationship with us, becoming like us and living among us as one of us. As the writer of the Philippians letter put it, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2: 5-8).¹ The Christian idea of incarnation points to a God who willingly sets aside power for the sake of relationship with God's creatures. Clearly for God, relationship is a priority.
- **Trinity:** One of our central ways of talking about God in Christianity involves a relational image, God as Trinity. Trinity depicts one God present in three "persons" who relate to one another and also to the created world. Some theologians see in the Trinity a way to image God that communicates relationship amid difference at the core of God's very being (i.e., God the Creator, Christ, and Spirit are distinct yet in relation to one another within the Trinity). Others use Trinitarian imagery of God relationally as a way to talk about God's participation with us, and our participation in the life of God, through Christ and the Spirit. This emphasis likewise focuses on God's relationality, this time with humanity. Catherine LaCugna says these two expressions of the Trinity in fact are not separate from one another: both image God in relational terms. LaCugna writes that the Trinity is not a way of talking about God in the abstract, but is "a teaching about God's life with us and our life with each other." Therefore, she continues, the theological understanding of God as One God in Three Persons "could be described as par excellence a relational theology."²
- **Neighbor-love:** When asked by his disciples about the greatest commandment, Jesus responded by saying: " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matt. 22: 38). Such texts focus on the qualities of love and

¹ The scripture quotations contained here are from *The New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A..

² Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1991), p. 1.

justice we embody in our relationships with others, especially those most different from ourselves or whose life circumstances situate them as more vulnerable. This aspect of faith practice concerns how Christians treat those with those who have less power in the relationship, or who lack resources to survive or flourish. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells his followers that whenever they feed the hungry, offer cool water to one who thirsts, and visit the sick and imprisoned, they do so to Jesus himself (Mt 25:31-40). In relationships of justice-making and care for these neighbors, then, Christians encounter Christ. That makes relationships of neighbor-love crucial events of relational encounter between believers and Jesus.

These three elements of Christian theology are not the only points of connection between faith and relationships. But they certainly highlight the importance of relationships within Christian theology in a way that practically shouts out, "Make no mistake! For Christians, relationships themselves are bearers of theological meaning and significance."

Church educators, pastors, teachers, and other leaders need to pay special attention, therefore, to building relationships among people in our churches and beyond them, in our wider communities. How might we go about inviting and building the kind of relationships that are so important both for shaping and expressing our faith? The answer to that question depends a great deal on the particular context of a faith community. But here are some general clues for tending to relationship-building in the congregation and community that flow from a theology where incarnation, Trinity, and neighbor-love set a relational stage for our lives of faith:

Practice hospitality. From the story of Abram and Sarai welcoming strangers into their tent at the Oaks of Mamre (Gen. 18: 1-8), to Jesus' injunction that his disciples should welcome children if they wish to welcome God (Mark 9; Matt. 18), the practice of "making welcome" is a basic faith practice needed for building relationships.

Bless small groups. Create them where they don't already exist, and encourage them wherever they might be happening on their own. Small groups allow people to be known by a smaller number of others but often at a deeper level of interaction. Our human needs "to know and be known," as Quaker educator and activist Parker Palmer puts it, are expressions of spiritual longing. Small groups organized around diverse purposes can be places where people's longings for relationship and connection find fulfillment.

Serve together. Few things help to build relationships more quickly and significantly than shared participation in ministries of service. Work together building a house for those in need of shelter; clean out the church basement and tend to the landscaping together; serve meals together in a community kitchen. Situations in which people from diverse segments of the church's population can participate together in such ministries, both in their communities and within the church, care for others while also being a space for relationship-building. Service beyond our own walls in the wider community and world offers Christians the chance to begin to form relationships with those who may be "other": strangers, the poor or the affluent, persons of other faith groups, and those of different races and ethnicities. Add

opportunities to reflect together theologically on service, and these events become powerful experiences of Christian education.

Make 'intentionality' your mantra. What are the necessary conditions for people to get to know each other? Something as simple as a habit of wearing nametags at all sorts of gatherings expresses intentionality about knowing names as an aspect of building relationships. Making time for people to “check in,” offering a brief update on their lives as the preface to a committee’s work, intentionally crafts meeting spaces as places where relationships may be built. Making sure that the church has good policies to allow for safe practices with children is part of a congregation’s intentionality about relationship building with and among its children whose age can make them vulnerable. Some relationships may “just happen.” But, given the significance of relationships for Christians theologically, being more intentional about relationship building is a necessity.

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