

Moving Toward Each Other
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UCC Minister Lillian Daniel once reflected on the practice of hospitality at a church she served in Connecticut. Her church was in the inner city and desperately needed new members to keep the doors open. Her first Sunday there, two men visited the church named Tim and Jack. They introduced themselves at coffee hour as partners, and the response from one of the older women in the church was, "And what kind of business are you two in?" Jack and Tim shrugged it off and nicely explained their two separate jobs. The elderly woman concluded to Lillian Daniel, her pastor, "perhaps they're in investments." [1]

Daniel decided to visit Tim and Jack at their home and speak to them about the church. She blurted out in this awkward visit that though the church didn't have many gay members, they desperately needed new members. She explained the church as she dreamed it would be, as "a place where all people would be welcome and God's grace would abound." Tim and Jack listened and said they had prayed a lot about it, and realized they wanted to be part of this community, and that their ministry in the church would be a ministry of hospitality.

In their first year at the church, they decided to throw an Epiphany party at their home. Daniel was worried sick, hoping that Jack and Tim's hospitality would be accepted, that the flock would show up for these two men who were really putting themselves out there and who were probably denied hospitality from the Church in the past. It ended up that the older members arranged to go to the party together on this chilly winter's night; they wore their Sunday's best and balanced their tea sandwiches with grace and ease. They appreciated all the care Tim and Jack put into the party, down to the beautiful table setting and the doilies under the cookies. One of the women remarked, "Now this is a party the way we used to do them." [2]

Daniel concluded that on that Epiphany night hospitality went many ways, "our hosts invited us into their lives and their world. The church accepted the invitation, which in turn invited Jack and Tim deeper into the church's life. But first God makes the invitations, when we take a moment to welcome a newcomer, when we make an awkward visit, when we serve a cup of tea, when we entertain angels unawares." [3]

I really appreciate this story. It gives me hope for how communities of faith can be, that we can all grow and push ourselves a bit to expand our boundaries and invite all people to the table, old and young, gay and straight, new and old to the church, male and female, everybody. And when Paul was writing his letter to the Christian community in Rome, he also was appealing to the call to hospitality, for people to see the traits and characteristics we share more so than what could divide us.

Paul uses some family metaphors in Romans Chapter 8, "So then, brothers and sisters . . . for all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God ... When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is the very Spirit bearing witness . . . heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ." [4] So much family language here—children, Father, heirs, brothers, and sisters!

Clayton Schmit, Worship Professor at Fuller Seminary, explains it like this, "The role of the first person of the Trinity is as a divine parent. All who believe are sons (and daughters) of God. How so? The Spirit lives in us (8:9) and testifies with and through us (8:16) that we belong to God's family . . . we become siblings to Christ, and fellow heirs of all that Christ has." [5] Paul is basically telling the Romans that in the Church, we are all family members. We are children of God, we are brothers and sisters one with another, and we are brothers and sisters of Christ through the Holy Spirit within all of us. Relationships matter.

Schmidt says that the main point of the text is not so much to lay out Trinitarian theology, even though today is Trinity Sunday and we should be celebrating the Trinity. No, the main point is that Paul wants to draw us into the family of God because everyone needs to belong to something. He writes, "All people have the same basic need for belonging: people to call friends and family, relationships that are safe and rewarding, places that feel like home . . . the Three-in-One establishes a home for us." [6]

I love the story about a student who was living alone in Italy for a year. She went to mass every evening in the small Italian town where she was living and studying because she wanted to worship God and she wanted to interact with other people. Disciples of Christ minister Stephanie Paulsell, who wrote about this student, said "Living alone, she often went all day without feeling a human touch. The ritual moment of passing the peace was the high point of the service for her, because it provided a safe space for her to touch and be touched by other people—even people she did not know." [7] This most basic human interaction of acknowledging one another's basic humanity, of showing hospitality and welcome by shaking someone's hand or giving someone a hug, should be what church is all about. For we are, as Paul says, "heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ." [8]

What we see in Romans Chapter 8 is that both the Jews and Gentiles in the Roman Church belong in the Church together. They all call upon the same God and are brothers and sisters. At the time, they didn't hesitate to use exclusively male language for God the way some of us may today. But the Jews would say, using the same language Jesus himself used, "Abba!" which many scholars translate as "Daddy," an incredibly intimate and heart-felt term for God.

On the other hand, the Greeks would say, "Pater!" which translated as "Father." So maybe they could look at each other with some distrust, because they use different names for their Divine Parent. But Paul tells them, "When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God." It's this recognition that we may use different languages and belong to different nations, but we mean the same thing. And we're in this together because we are all children of God. [9] It's a really beautiful sentiment, and one we would do well to remember today.

Because it all comes down to love and inclusive hospitality, of recognizing the common humanity we share, which makes our differences rather pale in comparison. It's like the great preacher William Sloane Coffin once said, "Love demands that all our actions reflect a movement toward and not away from nor against each other." [10] Whether we see this example in a lonely student in Italy, a hospitable gay couple in Connecticut, or the Jews and Gentiles struggling to be a unified community in Rome, the call to be brothers and sisters and children of God is there for us to see, the call to love one another by moving toward one another is so apparent.

So on this Trinity Sunday I hope you see the relational aspects of the Trinity—how God our Divine Parent, Christ our Brother, and the Holy Spirit the Mover and Shaker of the Trinity are all in relationship with one another and with us. And how we are all in relationship with one another and our Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer. And love is the force that binds all of these movements and connections together, as we move toward one another in celebration and joy. May it be so. Amen.

[1] Lillian Daniel and Martin Copenhaver, *This Odd and Wondrous Calling: The Public and Private Lives of Two Ministers*, 21.

[2] Daniel and Copenhaver, *This Odd and Wondrous Calling*, 25.

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] Romans 8:12, 14, 15-16, 17

[5] Clayton J. Schmit, "Homiletical Perspective on Romans 8:12-17," in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*, 39.

[6] Schmit, "Homiletical Perspective on Romans 8:12-17," in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*, 43.

[7] Stephanie Paulsell, "Honoring the Body" in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, Ed. Dorothy C. Bass, 22-23.

[8] Romans 8:17.

[9] Romans 8:15-16.

[10] William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*, 22.