

Pathways

Session 7
Fulfilled in relationship



Resources for participants

Reflective Stimulus

Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this. Whether it be a brief, single encounter or the daily fellowship of years, Christian community is only this. We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ. What does this mean? It means, first, that a Christian needs others because of Jesus Christ. It means, second, that a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ. It means, third, that in Jesus Christ we have been chosen from eternity, accepted in time, and united for eternity.

[D Bonhoeffer, Life Together, p11]

Theological focus

The story of creation (Gen 2:14b-25) shows how highly God values relationships. God created everything to be in a state of perfect harmony. Human beings, created in the image of God, shared in harmonious and mutually beneficial relationships with each other which reflected the relationships within the trinity. Human relationships flowed out of, and were blessed by, a perfect relationship with the creator. Human beings were also in perfect harmony with the animals and all of the rest of creation. Before the advent of sin to distort and destroy those relationships, nothing disturbed them.

Although human beings are different from all the other creatures God created, the close relationship between human beings and the rest of creation is emphasised in the creation stories. God formed a human being from the dust of the ground and breathed his breath into that 'person' who became a living being (Gen 2:7). These two aspects need to be kept closely together – that human beings are one with the earth (which they share with all creation, and to which they will return) but contain the breath (spirit) of God. This means human beings have a 'vertical' relationship with God, and a 'horizontal' relationship with the rest of creation.

Human beings relate to each other at various levels. Each person is related to every other member of the human family, but God has placed us in a closer relationship with some people than with others. Relationships also change: for example parent/child relationships, friendships, work relationships, etc. The closer the relationship, the greater the mutual benefits, but also the responsibilities.

Sin has fragmented the relationships which God had established. The account of the fall (Gen 3) clearly shows how all relationships were immediately shattered by the advent of sin: between Adam and Eve (vs 7; 12); between God and human beings (vs 8; 10); between human beings and the rest of creation (vs 15; 17; 18). The natural self-centredness of sinful human beings leads to disharmony, conflict, and the breakdown of relationships at all levels. Individuals see themselves as the self-sufficient centre of the universe and see the rest of creation as provided for their benefit and exploitation. The Bible itself gives many examples of the tragedy of broken relationships (cf Gal 5:19-21).

Jesus Christ came to restore broken relationships. By restoring the relationship between God and human beings (the 'new creation'), Jesus also provides healing for all broken relationships: between the individual and him/her self; between the individual and other people; between people and the animals, the environment and all of creation. For Christ's sake God offers forgiveness and restoration and makes it possible for us to try to live in harmonious and loving relationships with one another. It also allows us to offer support and care to those who are experiencing difficulties in relationships (eg marriage breakdown, family strife, unacceptable work situations, congregational tensions, abuse and harassment, bullying, etc).

Living in relationship

Faith in Christ Jesus is what makes each of you equal with each other, whether you are a Jew or a Greek, a slave or a free person, a man or a woman.
Galatians 3:28 (CEV)

If you want to be great, you must be the servant of all the others. And if you want to be first, you must be the slave of the rest.
Matthew 20:26,27 (CEV)

God loves you and has chosen you as his own special people. So be gentle, kind, humble, meek and patient. Put up with each other, and forgive anyone who does you wrong, just as Christ has forgiven you.
Colossians 3:12,13 (CEV)

I give you a new command. Love one another. You must love one another, just as I have loved you. If you love one another, everyone will know you are my disciples.
John 13:34,35 (NIRV)

Suppose I speak in the languages of human beings and of angels. If I don't have love, I am only a loud gong or a noisy cymbal. Suppose I have the gift of prophecy. Suppose I can understand all the secret things of God and know everything about him. And suppose I have enough faith to move mountains. If I don't have love, I am nothing at all. Suppose I give everything I have to poor people. And suppose I give my body to be burned. If I don't have love, I get nothing at all. Love is patient. Love is kind. It does not want what belongs to others. It does not brag. It is not proud. It is not rude. It does not look out for its own interests. It does not easily become angry. It does not keep track of other people's wrongs. Love is not happy with evil. But it is full of joy when the truth is spoken. It always protects. It always trusts. It always hopes. It never gives up.
1 Corinthians 13:1-8 (NIRV)

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave YOU.
Ephesians 4:32 (NIV)

'Believing without loving is what gives religion a bad name.'
[Eugene Peterson, Christ plays in ten thousand places, p261]

The Calling of Humans

As humans we are *called by God*. God has expectations of us. These expectations are as multidimensional as our identity. God invites us to answer his call with our lives. We are first of all *called to be creatures*, to recall our basic connectedness with the rest of the creation, appreciating and celebrating it. Second, we are *called to be human*, to be creatures in conversation, responsible because response-able to God. Third, we are *called to be stewards*, caretakers of the world that does not belong to us but to God. Fourth, we are *called to be brothers and sisters* with other humans, working for peace, for justice, for the basic respect that all humans need, that enables all human becoming, working to realise the kingdom of God that Jesus witnessed to as present in our midst. Finally, we are *called to serve* where we are, those we are given to serve, with the gifts we have available to us for service. We are called not to be some generic human, but *called to be our particular selves* and to realise that self in particular and concrete service to the needs of particular others.

[Tom Christenson, *The Gift and Task of Lutheran Higher Education*, p71]

- How does this describe the interconnectedness of relationships?
- Why do you think it important to think about relationships in these ways?

Prayer

*Read the following passage slowly.
Allow yourself to pause at important words or phrases.
Repeat them and ponder them.
Close with some words of prayer.*

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

1 John 4:7-21 (NIV)