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## *Thank You for Relationship*

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**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam G. Candler**  
**Atlanta, Georgia**  
**Trinity Sunday**

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,  
the love of God,  
and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.*  
- 2 Corinthians 13.13

Thank you for being here this morning. I believe in the communion of the Holy Spirit, *koinonia* as it is called in the New Testament, spiritual community. And this morning, I am very glad to enjoy the community of the Cathedral of St. Philip: the "communion" of the Cathedral of St. Philip.

Many of you know that, in recent months, I have been a candidate for election as Bishop of Washington. It was an arduous process, even to imagine being called somewhere else; and it was a good one for me. I learned a lot about myself, and I learned a lot about a great diocese.

Yesterday, that faithful diocese elected someone else, an excellent priest. I was not elected, and I return today to a new chapter of my life here at the Cathedral of St. Philip. I am disappointed, for sure. I would have enjoyed the Diocese of Washington.

But today, I am preaching here on Trinity Sunday. No matter what the outcome was in the Diocese of Washington, whether I was elected or not, I knew that I wanted to preach here at the Cathedral of St. Philip on Trinity Sunday. Contrary to a lot of priests, I enjoy preaching on Trinity Sunday! It's become an old joke that senior ministers tend to assign their young curates the task of preaching on Trinity Sunday; everyone enjoys seeing the young curate try to explain an irrational doctrine. We've all heard some excellent analogies: to love, to the three states of water, to three-leaved clover.

But I actually prefer to be the one preaching on this great day, because this is a day for relationship. As I prepared to preach today, I glanced back at the sermons I have preached here at the Cathedral on Trinity Sunday, in 2002, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2008, and 2009. Let me review them, since some of you were not here on those days!

In 2002, I presented an atomic model of the doctrine of the Trinity. God is one atom, indivisible, of three particles: proton, neutron, and electron. These three particles, or persons, if you will, swirl around one another in endless adoration and respect. They need each other to exist.

From a distance, the reality of God appears solid and unified. Up close, God is still solid and unified, but God is also always in motion, always swirling about. One can never pinpoint exactly where God is, or what are the stable components of God.

In 2003, I compared the Trinity to the waves in the poetry of Psalm 93, verse 4:

"The waters have lifted up, O Lord,  
The waters have lifted up their voice;  
the waters have lifted up their pounding waves."

Where I gaze at the waters lifted up, God is Source. Where I hear the steady voice of God in the waves, God is the Word. Then, after I have gazed into the infinite sea, and after I have heard the steady voice of Word in the waves, there remains the one important movement of diving into the ocean. I must participate. I must be washed in the water. "The waters have lifted up their pounding waves," said the psalmist. Thus, God is Spirit, who washes over us and even pounds us like an exquisite massage; God the Spirit who invites us to participate. God is Source, Voice, and Washing.

In 2004, I used one of my favorite analogies of the Doctrine of the Trinity. The Doctrine of the Trinity is like Neopolitan ice cream! It is not just vanilla ice cream, not just chocolate ice cream, not just strawberry ice cream! God is the best of all ice creams, all together!

In 2007, I said that the Doctrine of the Trinity serves to remind us that we can never take language about God to be literal. Is God a shepherd? Is God a literal rock? Is God a son? Is God a heavenly dove?

Yes, God is all these things, but God is not all those things literally. That year, I praised the dogma of the Trinity. It is not a literal dogma. It is a dogma that allows the image of God to be more than one image. The spirit of the very doctrine speaks against narrow literalism. The doctrine itself proclaims various points of view about God!

In 2008, I preached on the Trinity by using an image presented by Bill Bishop, in his book called *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart*. "It's counterintuitive," Bishop wrote, "but people grow more extreme within homogenous groups as a way to conform."<sup>1</sup> People grow more extreme when they congregate in homogenous groups. The Doctrine of the Trinity, I claimed, teaches us that even God is not homogenous!

Two years ago, 2009, I said that the Trinity is a story, a story about relationship. "It is not in a particular verse of scripture, but in countless different stories of scripture, that Christians""over time""came to understand the Trinity of God."

"In the stories of scripture, we learn that the God who created the world is a personal creator, like a Father or Mother. In scripture we also realize that God actually became manifest and real among us, became flesh among us, in Jesus Christ. In scripture, we learn that God also moves and inspires and sets on fire ordinary people; this force, orthodox Christians call "Spirit." God is all three of these persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

In all these ways of describing the Trinity, I have tried to reiterate one basic principle: God, the Holy One of God, God, is nevertheless in relationship. Even God, who is above all and in all, lives in relationship. In fact, God is relationship. God does not fit inside just one person. God is three persons living in the ongoing event of relationship.

So, today, in 2011, I am honored to preach again on Trinity Sunday. For me, the very doctrine of the Trinity is always moving. It is not static. Preachers who try to preach it in only one way miss the entire point of the doctrine. It is NOT a static, unchanging doctrine, just as the Trinity itself does not describe a static, unchanging God.

The Trinity is about relationship. God lives in relationship. Indeed, God lives as relationship, as should we.

These last several months, I offered myself to wider service as a possible bishop in the Episcopal Church. It was an arduous and soul-searching process. But I am a man who knows God in community. I have found God in these recent months, in the communion of the Holy Spirit, in the community of three wonderful relationships.

The first is my relationship with family. On this Father's Day, I think of my own father who was lovingly bewildered that I would consider moving to Washington. (His prayers were definitely answered yesterday.) Most of you also know that my wife, Boog, is truly wonderful. She might be evidence that God really can fit inside one person! She has been a faithful friend during this process, and she helped me see God.

Secondly, I saw God in the people of the Diocese of Washington. It is quite a diverse, and very challenging, community. I liked meeting them and engaging them. Their questions, and their challenges, were good for me. Yesterday, their votes determined that someone other than me should be their next bishop, and I wish them well. I am grateful for the relationship I have with that diocese.

Finally, however, I have seen God in my relationship with you, the people of this parish, the Cathedral of St. Philip, and other friends across this area. You are truly a loving and beloved community. You have been magnificent to Boog and to me. You have been supportive, understanding, gracious, and faithful; and I so appreciate that.

Many of you (especially in my family relationships!) admitted ambiguous feelings about the possibility of my leaving, but you were willing to see me as bishop in Washington. Now that I have not been elected, I will need you to take me back!

This has been a true discernment process for me, and I sense that this has been a valuable discernment process for the Cathedral of St. Philip. Both of us have imagined new possibilities, even if they were challenging ones. Now, we do, indeed, have new possibilities: God has led us to remain together, and I am excited about that relationship. The Cathedral of St. Philip is one of the strongest and most vigorous parishes in the country, and I am honored to continue my ministry here with renewed energy and great love for all of you.

God lives in relationship, and God lives in our relationships. Because it is in relationships that we go through change together. When we change together, when we go through joy and sadness together, and gain and loss together, when we go through death and resurrection together, God blesses us; and God grows us into true community. I have been honored to go through those chances with so many of you, pastorally, in the past years, and I hope will go through them with you in the future.

"May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion""community"" of the Holy Spirit be with all of us, always!"

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler  
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

<sup>1</sup> From *The Utne Reader* magazine, May-June 2008, page 46.