

8 March 2009

In This Together

(This is the second message in our Lenten series 'Together Again: The Meaning of the Atonement'.)

John 17:20-26

Some of you know that I worked as an electrician when I was younger. That job came about in a strange way: My cousins Joe and Jerry had a company that installed fire alarm systems in old buildings. One day Joe got locked in a dark stairwell and couldn't get out for the better part of a day. It shook him up a bit, and so he decided that he needed a helper. I came home from work one day (making sandwiches for \$1.75 per hour) to find Joe negotiating with my dad for me to come and work with him. I was hired on the spot and went to work for Signal Systems Inc. I made \$2 per hour. That was 1978 and I was 15. I worked for them during my summer holidays and other non-school days for the next 11 years—through high school, university and about halfway through my time in seminary.

I learned a lot during that time, and some of it was even about electricity. My cousins were both Navy veterans from the Vietnam era, and I was a fairly sheltered kid from the suburbs. A lot of what I learned from them I have to discipline myself to forget...every single day.

But I learned some basic electrical principles, too. The most important concept to know in electronics is the idea of the circuit. Here are some dictionary definitions.

An electronic circuit is a closed path formed by the interconnection of electronic components through which an electric current can flow.

That means that in order for electricity to flow and power electrical things, it has to move in an unbroken circle—a circuit.

There are two main types of circuits: series and parallel. A string of Christmas lights is a good example of a series circuit: if one goes out, they all do. In a parallel circuit, each bulb is connected to the power source separately, so if one goes out the rest still remain shining.

That means that how a circuit is designed will determine how fragile it is—how it responds to challenges and breakage.

Isn't that interesting?

The Bible says a lot about how God designed us. It has a word for how we were made to function—how we were made to live: *Shalom*. We were created to live in a constant, blissful state of perfect *Shalom*. That word appears more than 250 times in the Old Testament—it's clearly important to God that we understand it. We usually translate it as 'peace', but as I said last week, that doesn't do it justice.

Just to review. In the Old Testament *Shalom* has a broad range of meanings. It can refer to the communal well-being of the nation, or physical health. A sense of contentedness or happiness in relationships. It often describes a state of completion and wholeness. One writer called it 'the webbing together of God, humans and creation in justice, fulfillment and delight.' In the famous blessing from the Book of Numbers, we hear this: 'The LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you Shalom.'

One thing that is always true in the way the Bible describes *Shalom*: It can only be found in the presence of God.

So let's keep this part set firmly in our minds: We were designed to live healthy, content, happy lives filled with wholeness and peace, all in the presence of God. '*The webbing together of God, humans, and creation in justice, fulfillment and delight.*'

The main point here is that our relationships depend on our ability to be interconnected—on the free flow of *Shalom*—between us and God, within our own lives, between us and each other, and between us and the earth.

The focus of this series as we move through Lent builds on everything we've talked about here since September. The Lord's Prayer, the season of Advent and the celebration of Christmas, and our look at what it means to be a contagious church. The theme during Lent is an important one. We can sum it up in a single sentence: The work of Christ on the Cross restores our broken circuitry. It offers healing for our relationships at all levels—with God, with ourselves, with each other, and with nature. That's the outline for what we'll be doing over these next 4 weeks.

20"My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: 23I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. 24"Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world. 25"Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. 26I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."

Our text today comes at the end of a long section that begins back in chapter 13. Jesus had gathered his disciples together for a Passover meal, a tradition that reminded Jews of the way God had spared them and saved them from slavery in Egypt. But this wasn't like any Passover any of them had seen before.

Just as the food was coming out, Jesus took off his robe and left himself dressed as a slave would be, and then he washed the disciples' feet...one at a time. Three years of following

him—three years of listening to him explain who he was—three years of coming to believe that Jesus was the Messiah God had promised to ransom captive Israel. And now he was washing their feet.

He went on to explain to them what was about to happen, and then he comforted them—this is the part of the Bible where we hear the words: ‘Let not your hearts be troubled—do not be afraid.’ Jesus tells them a parable, promises them the gift of the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, and then promises them that everything would be made whole again someday.

It’s hard to imagine what the disciples would have been thinking right then. The Messiah had washed their feet, predicted some fairly amazing events, and promised something called the Holy Spirit—all before the dessert course.

Then Jesus began to pray. He prays first for himself, and then he prays for the disciples. He ends his prayer with the verses we just read—a prayer for all believers in all times—a prayer for complete unity among the faithful, and between the faithful and God himself.

In this prayer Jesus is asking for God’s *Shalom* to be restored to his people, even though he knew that restoration would require his own sacrifice. Almost immediately after finishing his prayer, Jesus was arrested and put on trial and sentenced to die. During this season we remember that all of this was done to heal our broken *Shalom*—the connections we were made to enjoy.

I mentioned last week that one of my former pastors described the Trinity in an important way. Rather than try to explain rationally what it meant for God to be three persons in one, he said this: ‘At the center of the universe, there is a relationship.’

If it’s true that God lives in a constant, state of relationship as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and if the Scriptures teach that we’re somehow made in the image of this relational God, then what does that mean? The idea of being made in the image of a relational God means at least one thing: We were made to live as relational people—interconnected people whose relationships mirror the redemptive work of Christ in his life, death and resurrection. The breaking of that interconnected, relational way of living, breaks the circuit that gives us life, and cuts us off from our true source of life and power.

So we come to this week’s reflection on how Christ reconciles us to God. That’s what Jesus is praying for in our text this morning. He was praying that his ministry would bring people closer to each other and closer to God—closer in the *Shalom* sense of being webbed together with him in justice, fulfillment and delight. He was praying that his ministry and sacrifice would repair the broken circuit that cuts us off from the power that frees us to live as we were made to live.

Maybe it will help again to put this talk about electrical circuits into relational terms. Think of the word ‘estranged.’ Literally it means to be made strange to someone else—to become a stranger to someone who was once known. That’s what happens when sin breaks the perfect *Shalom* God created for us. We are made strange—even strangers—to God. At that point we cease to function as a healthy, whole circuit.

But we were made to live in that state of *Shalom*—to have whole and holy, fulfilling, connected relationships with God. When that relationship is broken—when our life-giving power is cut off—it can be as frightening as being locked in a stairway alone...in the dark...separated from the one who lives in a state of eternal relationship, and made us to live that way, too.

In his prayer Jesus says to his Father: 'I pray also for those will believe in me, that all of them be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.'

It's crucial to understand just exactly we have been restored to do. You've heard me say many times that God's blessings come to us with the understanding that they're to be shared. Jesus prays passionately for Christians to sense the closeness—the oneness—with God. To experience the intimacy with God that we were meant to know. But in the same breath he reveals that there's a purpose in that closeness—that relationship. 'May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.'

God's perfect *Shalom*—'The webbing together of God, humans, and creation in justice, fulfillment and delight.'—is something that is made to be shared. The perfect circuit of God's relationship to his creation is meant to draw all of creation into that relationship.

But that still doesn't describe what it means to be close to God—to have our relationship to God restored to its original condition. How do we do that? There's no easy answer, but some have found a way to talk about that relationship in helpful ways.

Brother Lawrence was a Carmelite monk in France for almost 60 years. He spent most of that time washing dishes and repairing the sandals of the other people in the community. He wrote a series of letters toward the end of his life that became a little book called '*Practicing the Presence of God.*' In it he wrote:

'When we are faithful to keep ourselves in His holy presence, and set Him always before us, this hinders our offending Him and doing anything that may displease Him. It also begets in us a holy freedom, and, if I may so speak, a familiarity with God, where, when we ask, He supplies the grace we need. Over time, by often repeating these acts, they become habitual, and the presence of God becomes quite natural to us.'

Praying and studying and thinking about God isn't something we do just because we're told to. It's not just a set of habits we develop because they make us look like holy people. They're certainly not just a set of rules that make us feel guilty when we don't do them enough.

Christian spiritual disciplines are something we practice so that we can have a glimpse into the mind and heart of God. It's a way of reconnecting and recharging our experience of the relationship God made us to have in the first place. Practicing God's presence through prayer and study and meditation is a way of enjoying life more deeply and completely than we could ever imagine.

Brother Lawrence reminds us that this doesn't have to be complicated.

'My most usual method is this simple attention: an affectionate regard for God to whom I find myself often attached with greater sweetness and delight than that of an infant at the mother's breast. To choose an expression, I would call this state the bosom of God for the inexpressible sweetness which I taste and experience there. If, at any time, my thoughts wander from this state from necessity or infirmity, I am presently recalled by inward emotions so charming and delicious that I cannot find words to describe them.'

'...an affectionate regard for God...' Can you imagine that? Does that sound appealing to you? Does it sound possible?

As we move through this season of Lent—this time of reflection and preparation for the celebration of Resurrection Day—focusing on our relationship with God should move to the center stage. Jesus prayed for us on the night he was betrayed—he prayed that his ministry and sacrifice would put an end to betrayal and brokenness once and for all.

As we move through this season of Lent, I invite you to set aside the time and energy it takes to practice the gift of God's presence in your life—to find that inexpressible sweetness Christ makes possible through the healing of God's *Shalom*. Amen?