

We tend to think that God has a vision *for* our life—places to go, people to meet, and things to do—but tend to forget that God has a vision *of* our life—a vision of who we are meant to become. In Ephesians 4:11-13 the apostle Paul tells us that “*God is at work in us, as we enter into relationship with one another and serve one another, and His goal is this: that we would be united in our faith and filled with the knowledge of Jesus, so that we might become mature people, fully developed, just like Jesus.*”<sup>1</sup>

God has a vision *of* your life, and in His vision, you are becoming mature, fully developed, just like Jesus. Over the last four Sundays, we have been casting a vision of spiritual maturity, focussing on the twin aspects of emotional and relational health. To proclaim ourselves spiritually mature and yet continue in unhealthy emotional and relational patterns is an oxymoron.

The last two weeks we’ve talked about the importance of embracing emotion in our journey towards God and others, we’ve been saying that unless we process, understand, and embrace our emotions, our maturity will be stunted. Jesus, the only fully developed human being, was not a stranger to His own heart; He managed to deal with rejection, betrayal, and loss while still moving towards God and others in a healthy way. This is a part of God’s vision of maturity. This is what God wants for us.

This morning, I’m going to continue to talk about *Becoming Whole*, and I would like to come back to something I said in my opening sermon. I said that our challenge in becoming whole is, of course, that we live in a broken world, as broken people, with broken desires,

broken emotions, and broken relationships—so if we are going to find wholeness, we’re never going to find it in ourselves. We need to find our wholeness in God. This Sunday and next, I am going to do exactly that—I want to talk about what wholeness in God looks like. And to begin, I’d like to invite you to brainstorm with me.

**illus:** I want you to think about the best relationship you’ve ever had. Perhaps it is (or was) a relationship with a friend, a parent, a sibling, or a spouse—*what is the best relationship you’ve ever had? What characterized this relationship?*

- **capture thoughts on a White Board**

Great relationships don’t just happen—they are *made* not *born*. Great relationships have defining characteristics—we can measure them; we can specify what makes a relationship great. In the same way, if certain characteristics are missing from a relationship, we can safely predict its demise.

There is one Relationship that is greater, better, higher, more perfect, and beautiful than any other. In fact, this Relationship is the fundamental reality upon which everything in the universe stands—I’m talking of course about the Trinity.

Jesus came, in part, to reveal who, and what, God is. And His revelation changed everything—we can no longer talk about God without talking about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. At the heart of the universe, in the very being of God, there is a relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—everything that was, is, and will ever be, finds its Source in this Relationship. I want to explore this

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Peters’ paraphrase.

Relationship with you over the next two weeks, defining the wholeness they enjoy. Let's take a look at the Scriptures.

## 1. Relationship Within The Trinity

Mark Shaw has examined the Gospel of John and discovered four characteristics that mark the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: (a) *full equality*; (b) *glad submission*; (c) *joyful intimacy*; and (d) *mutual deference*.<sup>2</sup> I'm going to be moving quickly through a number of texts, feel free to follow along with me on the screen.

John 1:1-2 says, "In the beginning was the Word [**God the Son**], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning." The Father and the Son are presented as *equals*—both possess full divinity.

And yet, this *full equality* is lived out in *glad submission*. In John 1:14 we read, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." Philippians 2:6-7 reminds us that Jesus, "being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant". Jesus' *equality* with Father, didn't keep Him from *glad submission* to the Father's plan for the world.

In John 1:18, we see Jesus *defer* to the Father by seeking to make Him—not just Himself—known. "No one has ever seen God, but the

one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known."

In John 3, we see the reciprocal nature of *joyful intimacy* and *mutual deference* between the Father and the Son. Vs. 35 says, "The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands."

In John 5, we see all four characteristics at play. In vs. 18, John recounts an interchange between Jesus and some religious leaders—these leaders wanted to kill Jesus (a) because He was breaking the Sabbath, and (b) because He was calling God His own Father and thus claiming *equality* with God. Verses 22-23 further reveal both the *full equality* between Father and Son, as well as the *deference* of the Father to the Son. John writes, "the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honour the Son just as they honour the Father. Whoever does not honour the Son does not honour the Father, who sent him."

In vs. 19 we see the *glad submission* of the Son to the Father—"Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does." *Joyful intimacy* is seen in verse 20; John writes, "For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does."

In John 14 and 16, we see the characteristics of full *equality* and *mutual deference*, but this time we see them played out between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. John 14:13, 16, says, "I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in

<sup>2</sup> Mark Shaw, *Doing Theology With Huck and Jim*, 62.

the Son...And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth”.

John 16:13-15 reveals both the *glad submission* and the *mutual deference* between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. “When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you.”

Finally, in John 17, Jesus prays that everyone who follows Him will enter into the joyful intimacy that characterizes trinitarian relationship. “Father, just as you are in me and I am in you...May they also be in us...I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I 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.”

I want to stop here and call a “time out.” Did you noticed the shift in this last passage? In each of the previous examples, we have been given a window into the inner life of the Trinity; the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is being described. But what Jesus says here is that this Relationship isn’t exclusive.

Stephen Seamands writes, “The trinitarian circle of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is...an open, not a closed circle. Through faith in [Jesus], through baptism *into* the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

we enter into the life of the Trinity and are graciously included as partners.”<sup>3</sup>

**illus:** I’ve used this illustration before but it’s the best way I know to describe this reality. I want to call on three volunteers to join me on stage. These three are going to represent the Father, Son, and Spirit. They’re going to go ahead and link arms with one another to represent the threeness and oneness of the Trinity circle. We could say of this Relationship that *full equality, glad submission, joyful intimacy*, and *mutual deference* lives here. This Relationship is greater, better, higher, more perfect, and beautiful than any other.

And because of what Jesus has done for us—dying on the cross, bearing our sin, winning forgiveness for us—we are invited into this circle, to participate in this Relationship. We’re included because Jesus is included, we’re accepted because Jesus is accepted, we belong because Jesus belongs, and we are united to Him.

- dismiss volunteers

In order to make this analogy really work, we would need a circle big enough to include billions of people. When we were included in Christ, we were not dropped into a private trinity circle—there are not billions of individual trinity circles—there is One that encircles us all. Surrounded as we are by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, included as we in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we participate in their life together.

If Father-Son-Holy Spirit relationship is the fundamental reality in the universe--and the Relationship in which we participate—then this

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Seamands, *Ministry In The Image Of God*, 12.

Relationship is the essential paradigm for all our human relationships. If we are looking for relational wholeness, we need to look to this Relationship. The *full equality, glad submission, joyful intimacy, and mutual deference* that we see in their Relationship becomes the pattern for all of our relationships.

In the time remaining I would like to talk about the implications of their Relationship in terms of three commitments: (a) a commitment to wholeness; (b) a commitment to spiritual friendship; and (c) a commitment to healthy family relationships.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Implications of Trinitarian Relationship

### (a) a commitment to relational wholeness

If you are like me, there are times when you have been talking with someone you care about but you have reacted poorly to something they have said or done—in doing so, you have damaged the relationship. Brokenness abounds in our relationships—we cause pain and we experience pain.

Attachment theory suggests that there are two primary tendencies that contribute to relational brokenness. The first tendency is to seek security by becoming enmeshed in relationship. This tendency leads to relationships without boundaries, a kind of co-dependency—*you must love me, you must accept me, you must meet all of my needs*.

The second tendency is an error in the opposite direction—people who seek security in separation from others. This tendency plays

itself out wherever people hold back from one another, where they isolate, and self-protect.

Mature relationships require a healthy balance between embrace and separation, but most of us lean towards one of these two tendencies. *Which tendency do you lean towards?*

**illus:** Over the last month I have been quite open with you about some my own broken patterns of relating, so it probably won't surprise you to hear that I tend to seek security through unhealthy separation from others. I can't tell you how many times I have kept others at arms length in order to self-protect from the possibility of pain.

A few weeks ago I shared with a conversation that took place between my wife and I a few years ago—Naomi told me that while we had a *good* marriage, it wasn't a *deep* marriage. That conversation sparked an awareness of my tendency to hold back from others, to isolate, and self-protect; I began to see how this was negatively affecting me and the people I loved. I began to talk with trusted friends about this tendency and I began to make it a matter of prayer.

One Sunday, I came forward for prayer following the morning service. I briefly shared this tendency with someone on our Prayer Ministry Team and I asked them to pray for me—as they prayed, God gave me a mental picture. In it I saw my heart in a plexiglass box with the lid tightly fastened—my heart was protected on every side; nothing harmful could touch it. The problem was that nothing good, or beautiful, or life-giving could touch it either.

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<sup>4</sup> Seamands, 40.

When I shared this mental picture with the Prayer Minister, he asked, “*is Jesus in the picture? What do you see Him doing?*” At that moment the picture changed, I saw Jesus open the lid and very gently scoop up my heart and cup it in His hands. His message was plain: *You don’t have to isolate in order to find protection Mark; I will protect your heart.* Something shifted in me as we prayed that Sunday morning, and continues to shift.

Some of you have the opposite tendency that I have, my mentor being one. He is a deep feeler and he often jokes that Feelers don’t have their own emotions, they have everyone else’s emotions. If the people around me are happy, I’m happy. If they’re sad, I’m sad. If they’re doing well, I’m doing well, but if they are falling apart, I won’t be far behind. A lack of healthy boundaries makes it nearly impossible to self-differentiate. In a healthy relationship we need to be able to say to another, “*your feelings, your issues, your hang ups are yours; I will love you, listen to you, and even walk with you, but I cannot take responsibility for your life.*”

All throughout the New Testament, we see characteristics of healthy relationships. In a healthy relationship we know how to honour one another, forgive one another, be patient with one another, encourage one another, and correct one another. But one of my favourite descriptions can be found in 1 Corinthians 13:3-8. Let me offer my paraphrase to you.

*“No matter what I say, what I believe, or what I do, I’m bankrupt without love. Love is willing to wait for others; love is caring, considerate, helpful, and big-hearted.*

*Love doesn’t want what it doesn’t have. Love isn’t envious, doesn’t boast, brag, or strut about. Love doesn’t demand its own way, it isn’t always “me first,” love is slow to anger, and quick to forgive—love doesn’t keep “score” when it comes to an offence.*

*Love stands up to evil, and rejoices wherever the truth is honoured. Love always protects, never loses faith, always looks for the best, and endures in every circumstance. Love will never die.”*

When we pattern our relationships after the Trinity, we begin to experience relational wholeness. A second implication of trinitarian relationship requires us to commit to spiritual friendship.

### **(b) a commitment to spiritual friendship.**

Ephesians 4:16 says, “*From him [Jesus] the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.*” None of us become whole on our own. None become whole when we keep the circle to just “me and Jesus.”

Cloud and Townsend write, “Independence from relationship is independence from God himself, for he is present in his Body; it is also independence from the way he designed us to grow.”<sup>5</sup> There’s no sense praying fervently for relational wholeness if we are going to ignore the path He’s laid out before us. Ephesians 4:16 reminds us that much of the work God want to do in us will be brought *through* other people. We cannot grow in health apart from growing with, and towards, others.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Cloud and John Townsend, *How People Grow*, 122.

If you are looking to develop spiritual friendships, let me encourage you to join a small group. There is no better place for us to grow than with others who have already committed to growing in God with one another. A healthy small group is much like the Trinity circle—*it is open, not closed*. A group like this can name and address emotional/relational unhealthiness as it arises. In this kind of group, one can speak openly about weakness, struggles, even sin, without the fear of rejection. In this kind of group, one can find gracious acceptance, accountability, and strength to persevere.

I don't want any of us to be naive—these kind of groups are made, not born. Group members need to take off their masks, stop pretending, and have the courage to trust. Groups like this only exist when people dare to speak the truth in love. I've been a part of groups like this; I have a few spiritual friendships like this—there is nothing better, or more challenging.

A third implication of trinitarian relationship requires us to commit to healthy relationship within families and teams.

### **(c) a commitment to healthy families/teams.**

Wherever we find a commitment to things like *full equality, glad submission, mutual deference, and joyful intimacy*, we will find healthy, growing relationships.

*Full equality*: each member of the trinity can be distinguished from one another—the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not the Father; each makes unique contributions and each are fully God. In a human family, the Father is not the Mother, the Mother is not the child, and the child is not the

parent—each is different, and yet, each is fully human and worthy of dignity. Equality doesn't mean equivalence but it does mean respecting the personhood of each member. The moment we consider a person to be less important than we are, relationships immediately disintegrate. How different would family or a team be if treated one another as equals?

*Glad submission*: Ephesians 5:21 says, “*Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.*” Practically, this means taking other people's desires, preferences, and rights seriously, sacrificing one's own interests for their sake. Now clearly this can go too far and become unhealthy, but a fixation on our own self-interest will never lead us towards trinitarian personhood. Have you ever been a part of a family, a team, or a work group where one person always had to be right? Where in order for one person to “win,” everyone else had to lose? A family, a team, a work group that doesn't embrace glad submission is one that will never thrive.

*Mutual deference*: again, equality doesn't mean equivalence—I'm not talking about “one person, one vote”. In a family, parents are going to have more “power” when it comes to decision-making than small children. On a team or work group, the coach or the leader might have more “say” in the vision and direction, but “might” doesn't mean “right.” When power is used in a God-honouring way, people without power are seen as equals (full persons), worthy of respect, worth listening to, and capable of contribution and insight. Do we treat our children, spouses, siblings, or parents this way? would our relationships become more whole if we did?

There are some decisions in our home where Naomi and I talk, but ultimately, I defer to her—Naomi's wisdom, insight, and experience

is greater than mine in some areas; at times, Naomi defers to me. Where there is no trust, there is no submission, no deference, and no wholeness.

And finally, *joyful intimacy*: healthy families, teams, and work groups love and enjoy one another. And while “love” may take on a different form when it comes to a team or work group, generally I’ve found that teams that enjoy one another experience more longevity, creativity, and productivity than those who don’t. Love binds people together in such a way as to produce freedom—not freedom from others, but freedom for others.

**Conclusion:** If we are going to find wholeness, we’re never going to find it in ourselves. We need to find our wholeness in God. If you are looking for relational wholeness, then look with me to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The *equality, submission, intimacy, and deference* that we see in their Relationship is the pattern for all of our relationships.

**Pray**

**Worship**

**Benediction**