

Sermon Text: Romans 5:1-5

Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

My title is “God’s Determination to be Known.” It is a Trinity Sunday sermon, but I’m trying to approach it in a different way, and I hope a meaningful way that will touch us and help us understand the ways that God has reached out, sometimes successfully and sometimes not, to touch us, to change us, to embrace us.

I saw an old friend yesterday from college, and he was worried about his son, who is a rising senior in high school, and the boy just doesn’t have very many friends. Few connections, least of all, with his father. If he gets sent to his room, and he still does, he doesn’t care. Why should he? He’s got a TV in there. He’s got a computer connected to the Internet in there. He can happily stay in his room all week long. It’s not punishment. He’s got few real people in his life, and that little side issue made me think. You know, technology was supposed to save us. Technology was supposed to free us so that we could see each other more, and visit friends and family more, and have more free time, and get more things done so that we could be with each other more. Instead, technology has become a substitute for intimacy, a substitute for relationship.

We have imitation intimacy on so many levels. I don’t believe there are any true relationships shared by e-mail no matter how many emoticons you use. If you don’t use emoticons, ask your children or grandchildren, and they’ll tell you. Little smiley faces, winks, nods, such as that. It’s just not the same! Relationship happens one on one. We were made to relate to God and to each other, and all the shiny things that get between us are largely a waste of time.

You know, this is graduation season, and it reminds me. I remember the very last night in Shipp dorm before graduating from Wofford College. Everybody there had their rooms packed up. Every room was exactly the same with the same furniture, no posters on the wall. It was just empty rooms and boxes. All our distinctiveness was gone! On that night, God worked a strange thing. Many of the guys in Shipp dorm were nothing more than passing acquaintances. We had different majors. We had different social lives. We had different goals. We never really spoke, not really. That night, just sitting around in our packed-up rooms, waiting for graduation the next day, when we knew that we would never see each other again or probably not, we sat up all night and we talked, and guess what we talked about? God! Faith! Doubt! Fears! And the future! Rid of all the fluffy stuff and the shiny stuff that distinguished us from each other and fraternity and other dividing lines, we talked about what really concerned us. God! Faith! Fear! Doubt! And our future!

Surrounded by boxes, we spoke about the deep sense of how there must be something more. There has to be! How we had all felt something more just beneath the surface calling us to be, to become something more than we are. More than jobs. More than

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, June 3, 2007

marriages. More than bills and homes and cars and stuff. It made the previous four years seem like a waste because there were these same people, but in this moment, this sacred moment, close and sharing, relationship happened. At the very last possible moment, we related as humans with spiritual, God-given hunger!

Now, switching gears from the serious to the maybe ridiculous, I want to share a groaner with you. It’s a joke that you don’t so much laugh as groan, but it makes the point, I think. Susie and Joe met at a party, and it was love at first sight. They talked and they laughed all through the night. For the next year, Susie and Joe went everywhere together. They went to the movies. They went to the parks and the museums and to the restaurants and all the places that men will go when they’re dating, but not after they’re married. The night before he got a new job, an out-of-town job, Joe asked Susie, finally, will you marry me? Susie said no, I am not ready to get married. Joe, I’m not ready to get married. Joe was crushed. He didn’t give up. He took the job. He moved, but he wrote Susie every single day. Every day, he wrote a letter saying I love you, marry me, and every day, the mailman delivered Joe’s letters to Susie. After awhile, the mailman caught on, and he smiled, and said, another letter from your boyfriend. Joe sent Susie a love letter every day for two years, over 700 letters in all, and finally, Susie said okay, now I am ready to get married, and so she did – to the mailman!

The personal touch, it’s the personal touch that matters, that makes real relationship possible, and yet, there’s a risk and I know it, in knowing and being known by our struggles and doubts and fears, so we hold back even in church. I’ve been here three years now, and just now, people are starting to share some parts of themselves with me that they never would have shared in the beginning because they weren’t sure they could trust me. I had an older pastor say to wait ‘til you’re there seven or eight years, you’ll find out things you didn’t want to know! We don’t easily share ourselves.

It makes me sad though to come to church for years and even decades and still not understand that we were made, created to be in relationship not with computers and careers and cars and money. We were made to know and to be known by the creator God and by each other. Christian faith is about relationship, as scary as that is. Relationship with God and with others and with your true self. The trick is, and this is a bold statement, but I believe it is true, the trick is you do not know who you are until you know the God in whose image you were made. It is a bold statement, but I believe it. You really do not know who you are until you know the God in whose image you were made, and you cannot know how to relate to others until you know how much God loves and accepts you! To love and forgive, you must first understand yourself as just another sinner, falling so short of the glory of God that was meant to shine through you. The acceptance of God who forgives sins, the acceptance of yourself as another sinner makes forgiveness and makes relationship possible. Anything less is just posing and playing a part. Real relationship requires self-knowledge – knowledge of God’s acceptance of you and of others. Without God, you have a view that’s current in our world today. Without God, we are just accidents of a random universe that created itself and spat us up out of the dust and dirt to consume and fight and claw our way to the top, where we then die,

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, June 3, 2007

and turn back into dust. Without God, the story begins and ends with dirt! No relationship! No purpose! No hope!

The world we live in today increasingly insists that a world without God is just the way it is. Grab all you can! There’s nothing else! Still, God has not given up. God relates. God calls. God speaks to us in the stillness of the night. God bursts in and speaks to us, connects us, forgives us, and melts our cold hearts into things of flesh and feeling, even if we thought we would never feel again. There are times when God gives us, not hearts of stone as the Scripture says, but hearts of flesh and warmth where we feel again. Yearn for God and yearn to be connected to others.

From the Garden of Eden story to the burning bush and Moses to Passover to the parting of the sea and Jacob’s ladder of the dream, the ladder which went from Heaven to earth, and the manna that fell from Heaven to feed the children of Israel in the wilderness, and the prophets and the angels, who brought words of encouragement and words of warning and words of promise, and God also making covenants and promises for the good of humanity, all of this, it seems to show that even though the Bible paints humanity as stubborn and willful and resistant, the same Bible paints God as determined to be in relationship with His creatures, with you and with me. The relationship is on God’s terms, but the terms aren’t so difficult to understand. The Ten Commandments would be the short version. Even shorter, love God completely and love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Even though these simple categories are easy to understand, they seem impossible to keep. We can understand them. We might even believe that they are directly the Word of God. Love God and love neighbor as we love ourselves. We cannot seem to live this out, and so we needed a Savior.

Hebrews tells us what God has done. Hebrews 1, “In many and various ways, God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days, He has spoken to us by a Son, whom He appointed the heir of all things through whom He also created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of His nature, upholding the universe by His word of power. When He had made purification for our sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” The work of God in Christ is God’s offer. Our trust in that offer justifies us, draws us into relationship with the living God.

In Romans 5, Paul says, “Therefore since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand and we boast in our hope of sharing in the glory of God.” Most importantly, verse 5: “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. That means we didn’t have enough love without God’s Holy Spirit in there! We had an emptiness in our hearts that wasn’t able to really love as God has commanded us to love. That’s why we couldn’t keep the Commandments, but

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, June 3, 2007

now God’s love through our faith has poured His love through the Holy Spirit into our hearts!

You know Holy God with holy standards; none of us could live up to those. God could have wiped His hands of this whole creation as a failed experiment, but instead God was determined to be in relationship with us, and took the initiative at every turn. You have been reconciled, brought back together. With God, you’ve been reconciled through Jesus Christ. Accept it, and accept the relationship God offers. The offer comes with forgiveness and grace and the power to love. God’s power to love is being poured into your heart through the Holy Spirit. Can you love as well as you wish to? Can you forgive and move on? Do you even want to? If you do, then accept your acceptance in Jesus Christ, and claim the promise of His love poured into your heart. The ability to forgive because you are forgiven. The ability to love because you will know then that you are loved. Accept what God has offered – forgiveness complete and love complete and an embrace that begins now, but will not be completed until that day we see God face to face in Heaven.

Yes, we can see the Holy God face to face. Not by our merits. Imagine the pain and suffering of those who try and try and still try to earn God’s grace, not understanding that what God has done in Jesus Christ is a gift. Through God working in our spirits, we can be reconciled to each other, but we’re not! The problem is, the reality is, we’re not. We are not reconciled to each other. There is still jealousy. There is still hurt. There is still anger and old bitterness left over even in the hearts of those who are being saved! Why is this? Why the waste of a life that God wants to be good? Accept your acceptance. Accept the love God is putting there through the Holy Spirit, and use it to love as you have never loved before.

I said in the 8:28 I wouldn’t make y’all do this because it seems undignified in here, but let’s try it. If you feel so inclined, repeat after me. I am worth something. I am forgiven. I can forgive others. I am loved. I can now love myself. I can now love those who mean me harm. Thank you.