

REGENT COLLEGE

**“CALLED INTO THE GENERAL DANCE”:
SEX, LONELINESS, AND OUR RELATIONAL GOD**

AN ESSAY SUBMITTED BY DANIEL MELVILL JONES

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I remember exactly where I was when I heard the quote which crystallized the question I had been carrying ever since I arrived at Regent. I was in my second semester, sitting in the atrium and Zooming in to an online Missional Church lecture. The quote used in the lecture was from the late Christian counsellor Larry Crabb, who wrote the following about sexual intimacy:

When two people connect, when their beings intersect as closely as two bodies during intercourse, something is poured out of one and into the other that has the power to heal the soul of its deepest wounds and restore its health. ...It's there, waiting to be released, to work its magic. But it rarely happens.¹

This description described so well my own experience of marriage: Within the promised safety of my our marriage, the intimacy nurtured by our intertwined bodies and lives opened a space for some of my deepest wounds to be revealed and healed. It was through the love of another that I finally saw myself as loved.

Yet I knew that this experience was rare and not guaranteed. Many of my single friends at Regent never experienced this kind of intimacy. I knew that others found sexual intimacy to be a place of further wounding, rather than a source of healing. And so this quote provoked a question, a question which I am now bringing to this paper: If God has wired us for healing intimacy, why is such intimacy available to so few?

Answering this means recognizing that our triune God is intrinsically relational. Because God is relational, God is also invitational, seeking out others whom he calls into the fellowship of the Trinity. Therefore, to be made in God's image is to be made for others. It also means that

¹ Larry Crabb, *Connecting: Healing for Ourselves and Our Relationships A Radical New Vision*, (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing, 1997), xi.

we long to be delighted in, just as the Father delights in the Son. Sex thus offers the possibility of what Rowan Williams terms “the body’s grace,”² a tangible way of knowing that another delights in us. However, sexual relations alone cannot sustain this grace, as our body’s limitations and human failings make clear. We are not made only for sex and marriage, but for the *koinania* of the church, a life together centred around the Eucharist. Before I begin taking us through this argument in more detail, I would like to note that I will be drawing primarily from three theologians: Rowan Williams, David S. Cunningham, and Eugene F. Rogers.

Human flourishing requires relationships with others because our triune God is himself relational. For Williams, the phenomenon of human sexuality has its origins in our relational God. In his essay “The Body’s Grace,” he writes, “A theology of the body’s grace which can do justice to the experience, the pain and the variety, of concrete sexual discovery... depends heavily on believing in a certain sort of God – the Trinitarian creator and saviour of the world.”³ This is a God who, in the words of Cunningham, “is *wholly constituted* by relationality.”⁴ Cunningham draws on the work of the French philosopher of language Francis Jacques, who writes, “I shall go so far to say that God Himself *is* relationality,” clarifying that “God is He who is, the One who makes relations possible, because He Himself is a relation.”⁵ Our God consists of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; their ongoing relationship with each other constitutes who God

² Rowan Williams, “The Body’s Grace,” *The Anglican Church of Canada*, <https://www.anglican.ca/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/the-bodys-grace.pdf>.

³ Williams, 11.

⁴ David S. Cunningham, *These Three Are One: The Practice of Trinitarian Theology*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1998), 165. (Emphasis in the original.)

⁵ Francis Jacques, *Difference and Subjectivity: Dialogue and Personal Identity*, trans. by Andrew Rothwell, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 69. (Emphasis in the original.)

is. This is why Rogers can write, “God is not lonely; God has perfect love and community already in the triune life.”⁶

Also intrinsic to the Trinity is its invitational nature. God is not content to enjoy this fellowship on his own but is instead intent on inviting others into the Trinitarian life. Rogers’ delightful description of *perichoresis* demonstrates exactly this:

In the Trinity the Father is eternally sending the Son and receiving him back, the story of the Prodigal collapsed into a single, integral movement. Similarly the Son is always going out from the Father, and, precisely in going out, drawing near to the Father, since in going out the Son is gladly doing the Father’s will. The Spirit is witnessing and celebrating and delighting in this eternal dance of love, clapping for the dos-si-do of intimacy’s joyous enactment, which the Cappadocians called the trinitarian perichoresis, dancing around.⁷

By its very nature, the joyful fellowship of the Trinity cannot be contained within itself but must overflow in mission. The Father wants others to partake of this triune fellowship, so the work of the Son and the Spirit consist of bringing others into their shared intimacy.

This invitational nature of the Triune God is illustrated in two hymns, one ancient and the other contemporary. In his book, Rogers connects this doctrine to one of my favourite English carols, “Tomorrow Shall Be My Dancing Day,” which beautifully describes this missional movement.⁸ This medieval carol is written from Jesus’ point of view and summarizes each

⁶ Eugene F. Rogers, Jr, *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God*, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1999), 196.

⁷ Rogers, 198.

⁸ Rogers uses the carol to illustrate *perichoresis* in 197-98. My writing on the carol in this essay is my own close reading of its lyrics.

movement of his saving work—his incarnation, his baptism and temptation, his suffering and death, his descent into hell— with the repeated refrain: “[this I did]/ To call my true love to my dance.”⁹ The first stanza begins by setting out the intention of Christ’s acts of redemption:

Tomorrow shall be my dancing day;
 I would my true love did so chance
 To see the legend of my play,
 To call my true love to my dance.

After each verse, the chorus invites the redeemed to join the celebration through song: “Sing, oh! my love, oh! my love, my love, my love,/ This have I done for my true love.” The songs eleven verses then describe aspects of Christ’s life through this language of invitation. Being laid and wrapped in a manger “was my chance.../ to call my true love to the dance;” his temptation in the wilderness was the temptation “to have me break my true love’s dance;” his condemnation by Pilate “judged me to die to lead the dance;” his descent into hell is “for my true love’s deliverance;” and he resurrects “on the third day/ up to my love and the dance.” The carol’s last stanza describes Christ’s ascension: “I dwell in sure substance/ On the right hand of God, that man/ May come unto the general dance.”¹⁰ In this astonishing carol, Christ’s saving works are seen as movements of a dance by which he calls “his true love”—humanity—into the Triune dance that is already eternally in motion.

⁹ “My Dancing Day,” in *The Oxford Book for Carols*, ed. Percy Dearmer, R. Vaughan Williams, and Martin Shaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), no. 71, 158-59.

¹⁰ “My Dancing Day,” 159.

Wendell Kimbrough conveys something similar (albeit more concisely—this song has three verse, rather than eleven) in his 2013 hymn, “Who Is Like the Lord Our God?.” In this hymn, he draws together Psalm 86:6 and 113:9 in the following lyric: “The lonely he settles in families/
The barren, a mother he makes;/ O happy the heart of the stranger/ Who’s welcomed by this King of Grace.”¹¹ The Triune God delights in calling the lonely and isolated into the eternal love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Therefore, to be made in God’s image means we are made for community. Orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov puts this succinctly:

There is but one suffering: to be alone. A one-personed God would not be love. God is Trinity, one at the same time three. The human being, as a closed monad, would not be His image.¹²

Rather than acting like “closed monads,” when we humans open ourselves to others, we are responding to God’s image in us. This is why Crabb can state, “Trinitarianism teaches us that connecting is as vital to the life of our souls as blood is to physical life.”¹³ Opening ourselves up to another fulfills what is human in us, because by so doing we are joining God’s Trinitarian dance of love. As Rogers puts it, “The fulfillment of human community is in sharing the trinitarian community of God.”¹⁴

¹¹ Wendell Kimbrough, “Who Is Like the Lord Our God? (Psalm 113),” Cardiphonia Music, <https://cardiphonia.bandcamp.com/track/who-is-like-the-lord-our-god-psalm-113>.

¹² Paul Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love: The Nuptial Mystery in Light of the Orthodox Tradition*, Trans. by Anthony P. Guthrie and Victoria Steadman, (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1985), 115.

¹³ Crabb, 55.

¹⁴ Rogers, 209.

Like Evdokimov suggests, loneliness is a suffering that has its source in a lack of community. In his book *A Philosophy of Loneliness*, Norwegian philosopher Lars Svendsen defines loneliness as “an emotional response to the fact that a person’s need for connection to others is not satisfied.”¹⁵ The doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that such ‘connection to others’ is essential to our very being; according to Cunningham, Trinitarianism “encourages us to understand ourselves not as ‘individuals’ who may (or may not) choose to enter into relationships, but rather as mutually indwelling and indwelt.”¹⁶ This does not mean that we must always be around people to be fulfilled; rather, it means resisting the idea that we are “pathologically locked within [our] own boundaries.”¹⁷ Here on earth, what Rogers so accurately calls the “unbearable reality of separateness”¹⁸ will often define our mortal lives, yet knowing and living into the fact that we are destined for relationships can make a difference when we find ourselves apart from others.

Indeed, our human yearning to be loved, desired, and delighted-in is itself a reverberation of God’s love, desire, and delight for us. As Rogers writes, “God’s desire for human beings echoes in the human desire for human beings, for God desires that God and human beings should have desire for human beings in common.”¹⁹ God himself delights in each of us, in all our

¹⁵ Lars Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Loneliness*, trans. by Kerri Pierce, (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2017), 15.

¹⁶ Cunningham, 166.

¹⁷ Fay Bound Alberti, *A Biography of Loneliness: The History of an Emotion*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 9.

¹⁸ Crabb, xx.

¹⁹ Rogers, 227.

created specificity. No wonder we are also wired to delight in others. Williams sees the drama of salvation in a similar way: “The whole story of creation, incarnation and our incorporation into the fellowship of Christ's body tells us that God desires us, *as if we were God*, as if we were that unconditional response to God's giving that God's self makes in the life of the trinity.”²⁰

Astonishingly, God's delight in us is an extension of his own delight in himself, the delight the Father conveyed to the Son through the Spirit at Christ's baptism: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”²¹ That is why we desire the affection of others. Writes Crabb, “The deepest urge in every human heart is to be in relationship with someone who absolutely delights in us... [for] the longing to connect defines our dignity as human beings and our destiny as image-bearers.”²² To be the object of another's affection echoes our created purpose, which is why Rogers can therefore write, “We are created — and we marry — so that the desire of a spouse, divine or human, may show us to ourselves as occasions for joy.”²³

With all this as our background, we are better prepared to understand the possibilities and limitations of sexual intimacy. Karl Barth states that “creation is grace;”²⁴ one aspect of that grace is what Williams specifies as “the body's grace.” By this he means the grace that is available to humans through sexual relations. In a profoundly physical manner, sex can communicate that we are wanted and desired by another, that “we are pleased because we are

²⁰ Williams, 3. (Emphasis in the original.)

²¹ Matthew 3:16-17, NRSV.

²² Crabb, 45.

²³ Rogers, 275.

²⁴ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. by G. T. Thomson, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1959), 54.

pleasing.”²⁵ Sex—even sex outside of marriage!²⁶— has the potential of jolting us into an awareness of another’s love. Sex can open us up to the possibility of participating in the life of another.

Yet “sex is risky and grace is not discovered by all.”²⁷ With this brief phrase, Williams reminds us of the reality known by many: sex offers the *possibility* but never the *promise* of grace. Sex has the potential to draw us into the life of another and to communicate that we are loved and desired. Yet such grace can not be sustained through the sexual act alone. Bodies grow frail and virility fades. Sickness, disability, and the body’s decay are complications faced by all. Sexual intimacy—perhaps precisely because of its vulnerability and its potential for nurturing grace—can all-too-quickly become a source of abuse, anxiety, and shame. Sex can be a wonderful means of grace, but it alone is not enough to restore us as persons-in-communion.

Similarly, marriage can be a space where such intimacy can flourish,²⁸ but to view marriage as a private affair between two individuals misses the model of the Trinity. Rogers’s insights on this are remarkable:

The kingdom of heaven is [not] like a marriage... [Rather,] the kingdom of heaven is like a wedding *feast*. Love not only desires an other; love desires a witness, a third... The love

²⁵ Williams, 4.

²⁶ See Williams, 6-7.

²⁷ Williams, 8.

²⁸ As Williams articulates it, the public consecration of a marriage gives a couple the space and time to learn this body’s grace: “When we bless sexual unions, we give them a life, a reality, not dependent on the contingent thoughts and feelings of the people involved, true; that we do this so that they may have a certain freedom to “take time”, to mature and become as profoundly nurturing as they can” (6).

internal to God has an other, the Son, and does not lack for a third, either, to witness, bless, and celebrate it: this is the Holy Spirit. In a wedding, third parties celebrate, witness, bless, testify, and delight in the love of two. Wedding guests also guarantee and insure the love of two against times of difficulty, as the Spirit keeps faith between the Father and the Son, reuniting them after the crucifixion.²⁹

Just as the Spirit is crucial to the relationship of the Father and the Son, so too is community crucial to the success of a marriage. The community also reminds us that the kingdom of God does not consist entirely of married folk, nor does one's marriage encapsulate the entire kingdom of God. Rather, each human relationship is a microcosm of "the general dance" that Christ is calling all of humanity into.

A remarkable illustration of this can be found in my favourite movie, Wes Anderson's 2012 *Moonrise Kingdom*, so indulge me, please, as we illustrate this theology via a short trip to the cinema. After their young daughter, Suzi, runs away from home to marry her sweetheart, Sam, Suzi's estranged parents (played by Bill Murray and Francis McDormand) lie in their separate beds, lamenting their mistakes and staring up at the shadows the storm is casting on their ceiling. "We're all they've got Walt," Mrs. Bishop says to her husband. After a long pause, he replies with some of the truest words spoken: "We're not enough."

Indeed, it takes the entire island community coming together to protect the young couple, whose new marriage is quickly threatened by Social Services (Tilda Swinton). In the movie's climatic scene, all of the characters are forced by a flood into the island's Episcopal church, where together they combine their various gifts and resources to find the orphaned Sam an

²⁹ Rogers, 195-96. (Emphasis in the original.)

adopted father (Bill Willis), a provision which allows Sam to stay on the island. When lightning strikes the church steeple, the young couple is saved from destruction by hanging onto the hand of Willis's character, who is in turned anchored to the church building by a rope. "Don't let go," he commands the couple as a children's choir on the soundtrack sing Benjamin Britten's "Alleluia!" Anderson, who has often described his parent's divorce as the central event of his childhood,³⁰ seems to be suggesting that marriages, young and old, can not flourish in isolation, but instead need to be grounded in community, and, perhaps ultimately, in the church.³¹

Likewise, although marriage offers a sanctified space in which the "body's grace" of sexual intimacy can be expressed, it is certainly not God's ultimate vision for human flourishing. Instead, "the earthly mirror of [the Trinity's] complete mutual participation is the Church."³² Cunningham points us to two New Testament phrases which express the radical nature of God's intention for the Church. The church is likened to "a body" in 1 Corinthians 12:12, which means that her members "are — or should be — bound together in quite a profound way; indeed their lives implicate and are implicated by one another."³³ The New Testament also refers to the church as *koinania*, a word which "implies an intensely close relationship; in Greek literature, it was often used to refer to marriage... the most profound and intimate connection between human

³⁰ He is quoted as referring to it as "a bomb imploding" in Matt Zoller Seitz, *The Wes Anderson Collection* (New York: Abrams, 2013), 111.

³¹ Wes Anderson, *Moonrise Kingdom* (Focus Pictures, 2012), <https://itunes.apple.com/ca/movie/moonrise-kingdom/id1478483947>.

³² Cunningham, 168.

³³ Cunningham, 168.

beings.”³⁴ While St. Paul is clear that sexual relations are to be reserved for those who are married, his choice of these two words to describe the shared life of the church conveys the level of relational intimacy he expects from the church.

While relationships in the church are to be chaste, this does not mean that we cannot communicate to one another God’s desire for us. Williams states this plainly: “The life of the Christian community has as its rationale — if not invariably its practical reality — the task of... ordering our relations [so] that human beings may see themselves as *desired*, as the occasion of joy.”³⁵ Crabb also stresses this exact point, stating that “the foundational element” of Christian discipleship is “offering others a taste of Christ’s delight in them.”³⁶ To that end, Crabb urges churches to prioritize the forming of interpersonal connections, “with God (worship), others (loving service), and ourselves (personal wholeness)”³⁷ (or to put that last one more bluntly, “self-care” or even “self-love.”) Life in Christian fellowship offers us a profound—if rarely taken—opportunity for growing in interpersonal wholeness.

The Eucharist — that central act of Christian worship — can be the means of such formation. Partaking of the Eucharist requires our body and our senses. We go forward and the sacraments are brought to our lips; we taste the flavour of wine and the texture of bread. When I started serving communion at my congregation, I was struck by how sensuous this act can be. When I offer the cup, I am forced to look the communicant in the eye and see the specific details

³⁴ Cunningham, 182

³⁵ Williams, 3. (Emphasis in the original.)

³⁶ Crabb, 15.

³⁷ Crabb, 206.

of their embodied faces, and their drinking the wine requires the use of their mouths and lips. The Eucharist is a tangible way to “taste and see” God’s love and desire for us as embodied people.

Cunningham demonstrates that the Eucharist forms us into a people who participate in the divine life of the Trinity. He writes,

In the Eucharist, participation is manifested on many different levels. We participate in one another by sharing the bread and the cup, allowing ourselves to be formed into the Body of Christ. We participate in God through our reception of Christ’s body and blood. Finally, the Eucharist also weaves together the stories of the Three in various ways, and thereby testifies to the complete mutual participation within God. This practice thus provides one of the most important sites for our formation in the trinitarian virtue of participation and, in turn, it helps us to “see the form” of that participation in the triune life of God.

The interweaving of the actions of the congregation and the clergy, the ingesting of Christ’s body and blood into our very selves, the eucharistic liturgy’s prayers which call on all members of the Trinity and celebrate their mighty acts—all of this demonstrates our interconnectedness to each other and to God.

As I conclude, it is worth noting that our highly individualized society challenges the development such interconnected culture within churches. In her book *A Biography of Loneliness*, cultural historian Fay Bound Alberti is clear that “loneliness as a modern social affliction has grown up in the cracks... of a society that was less inclusive and communal and more grounded in the scientific, medicalized idea of an individual mind, set against the rest.”³⁸

³⁸ Alberti, xii.

The result is that “we are suspended in universes of our making in the twenty-first century, in which the certainty of the self and one’s uniqueness matters far more than any collective sense of belonging.”³⁹ Yet trinitarian theology, and indeed our own experience, suggests that we are far more interconnected than modernity might insist. Cunningham reminds us that because “I dwell in [my family’s] lives and they in mine, they are fundamentally constitutive of who ‘I’ am,” concluding that “the modern era has tempted us to think of ourselves as autonomous individuals, but upon deeper reflection, we recognize that such absolute distinctions fail to describe the communion and mutual participation we seek to embody.”⁴⁰ If this is true of a family, how much more ought it to be true of our spiritual family in Christ! Living as interconnected beings may come with the loss of privacy and an increased emotional vulnerability, yet we in our lonely society may not know how hungry we are for such an interconnected life.

As several of the writers I consulted suggest, resources for such a lifestyle may be found in the church’s long history of monasticism,⁴¹ a topic which I hope other Regent students will explore in further essays. May the Church use such resources to press into its calling to live in interconnected ways, thus rehearsing for our final entrance into “the general dance” with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

³⁹ Alberti, xiii.

⁴⁰ Cunningham, 169.

⁴¹ For these references, see Cunningham, 185, Rogers, 213, and Williams, 8.

Abstract: If God designed humans to find healing and wholeness through loving, sexual intimacy, why is that kind of intimacy available to so few? Because God is relational and invitational, to be made in God's image means we long to be delighted in, just as the Father delights in the Son. Sex offers the possibility of what Rowan Williams terms "the body's grace," a tangible way of knowing that another delights in us. However, sexual relations alone cannot sustain this grace, as the body's limitations and human failings make clear. We are not made only for marriage, but for the *koinania* of the church, a life together centred around the Eucharist.

Biography: Daniel Melvill Jones is halfway through his MDiv at Regent College and a diploma at Vancouver School of Theology, and is pursuing ordination in the Anglican Church of Canada. He has written or presented papers on a variety of topics related to theology and imagination, including Flannery O'Connor, St. Boniface, the film *Do the Right Thing*, and J. S. Bach. He enjoys baking bread, exploring nature alongside his wife, Annie, and thinking about all the books he gets to read.

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