Holy One, Holy Three, Breathe your Spirit over us. Amen.

What is it with Birth pangs? Hannah is desperate for them. Jesus tells the Disciples to expect them – although that’s pretty laughable. Think about it – one dude, in a circle with other dudes talking about birth pangs. As one who actually experienced birth pangs, I think Jesus throwing around the metaphor is funny.

Birth Pangs. Beginning of the End. Beginning of the New.

It certainly seems like if ever there was a time to think we’re in birth pang territory – this time in our collective psyche would be it. A friend forwarded a newsletter from a pediatrician suggesting, that barring some unforeseen craziness, we are actually, finally in the late stages of this pandemic. With 5 – 11 year olds being vaccinated, and two strong antiviral medications in pill form coming online… we’re nearing the finish line of a race that no one signed up for. This doctor wrote this note as a chin up – the end is in sight. This is good news. For a long time now I’ve been hoping, waiting, praying to hear someone say chin up – the end is in sight.

In today’s Gospel Jesus in his own way is saying the same thing. From the beginning we Christians have been hearing this message on loop. Chin up – the end is in sight. There’s no illusion when it comes to the life of faith - We know that there will be an end to this earthly experience. We know that there’s a finish line, we just don’t know when. Which is so infuriating and such a gift at the same time. Humans always want to know when, when will this be over – it’s a quirk of humanity. We see it on display with the Disciples as they whisk Jesus off to the side to privately ask him one final question about the destruction he has described. Possibly the single most important question they want answered - “Tell us, when will this be?...”

Jesus doesn’t answer that question. Jesus returns the conversation to the domain of the lived experience. He avoids the question about the mechanics of the Divine and shifts the conversation to one of leadership. In this moment Jesus’ non answers functions as a profound answer. Jesus reminds the Disciples, and therefore reminds us, that our focus should be on the here and now. By bringing the conversation to one about leadership Jesus is drawing the attention back to the realm of relationship, of interaction, of social cohesion – the realm of humanity. This is where human attention needs to be on – on getting to know one another, on learning who people are to make good choses about togetherness and leadership. This is an invitation to pay attention to the thing that matters most – our relationships.

I’ve been reading Richard Rohr’s 2016 book, The Divine Dance and I’m finding it wildly thrilling – exciting and terrifying at the same time. Just as any good thriller should be there’s a great mystery to be revealed. Rohr, being Rohr is happy to leave God as the Mystery. In fact, he writes in this book that he agrees with those who think we should retire calling God, God for 50 years and use the honorific Holy Mystery instead. And then after 50 years we should come together and see what we’ve learned about the Holy One before deciding to reintroduce the honorific term God back into our vocabulary. Fascinating right – but that’s a different homily.

The great Mystery that Rohr is unpacking is the Trinity. He is making the wild claim that if you want to know the Trinity, you don’t seek first to understand it, you seek first to be in relationship, for more than anything else, the Trinity is relationship. That in the relationship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is where the dynamism is. He uses as metaphor that also functions as an example - the most basic structure of the universe is the atom. An atom is essentially comprised of three parts – the proton, neutron and electron and the dynamism of an atom is not in any one part but in their interaction with one another. Similarly, humans best experience the Trinity, best understand the teachings of Jesus, are best able to live out their gifts in the world in and through relationships.

This sounds not very new or revolutionary, which is true frankly of all good ideas… but the implications of this in my life, frankly feel new and revolutionary. When I think of my biggest regrets; when I think of the ways the pandemic has hurt us most it is in the realm of relationships.

The world feels hurt and broken… Could it be because we haven’t paid enough attention to relationships? Worse, could it be because we have been led to believe that relationships are the sprinkles on the ice-cream cone of life, when in fact, they are the actual ice-cream. No meaningful relationships, no meaningful life.

Again, this sounds simplistic, but it flies in the face of how our society functions. Rohr lays this misunderstanding at the feet of Aristotle. Brilliant thinker, but he led Western culture down a path that subordinated relationships as inferior to “substances” – things that are independent of all else. “So a tree is a substance, whereas “father” is a relationship…” and he ranked them with substances, and their independent nature being giving the place of supremacy.

“Yet when this Jesus is revealed to us Christians by calling himself the Son of the Father and yet one with the Father, he is giving clear primacy to *relationship.”*

And this is his wild claim – that the saving work of God has everything to do with relationships. Jesus, the incarnate one, invited us into relationship with the Holy Mystery. You have been invited, are being invited this day into relationship with God, with humanity, with your own soul even.

The dominant systems of our world still subordinate relationships to things, to the “substances” of life. For those of us wondering what it means to have an authentic Christian witness these days, maybe the answer has something to do with reclaiming the essential nature of humans as relational creatures. Can we be a people for whom relationships are taken seriously?

Far from being simplistic – this might be the greatest challenge of all.

Rohr illustrates this powerfully. He writes: “Have you ever met a holy person? They’re always people who can stay in relationship at all costs.

People who are toxic, psychopathic, or sociopathic are always those who cannot maintain relationships, who cannot sustain relationships. They run from them. Usually, either they are loners or they make all relationships with them very difficult.

I once met a psychiatrist who made a statement to me that I thought at first was an overstatement. He’s older than I am, and he said, ‘Richard, at the end of your life, you’ll realize that every mentally ill person you’ve ever worked with is basically lonely.’ ‘Oh come on, that’s a little glib isn’t it? I replied. ‘Oh I admit, there are probably physical reasons for some mental illness, but loneliness is what activates it.

I’ve run this theory by several psychiatrist friends. After they get over their initial stunned objection – ‘Oh, Come on. That’s too simple’ – they agree! Every case of nonphysiologically-based mental illness stems from a person who has been separated, cut off, living alone, forgetting how to relate. This person does not know intimacy and is starved for communion.”

People of communion, we are the antidote; now let us go out and share it with the world. Amen.