

The Shack: Part 3
“The offer”

(1 John 4:16b-21 and John 17:18-23)

When I was a little boy, about six or seven years old, I had a crush on the teenage girl next door. I thought we had a common bond. We both liked Ricky Nelson! In fact, I loved singing along with Ricky. She would invite me over to listen to Ricky Nelson records with her girl friends. I soon discovered that her interest was in a “cute” little boy.

I really did want to have a relationship with Patty, but I guess the age difference did matter. She had other interests beside Ricky Nelson, and at least one of those interests involved a boy who was probably her own age! I just couldn't get her attention beyond being the “cute” kid singing Ricky Nelson songs. And then I met the seven-year-old girl three doors down the street who had a swimming pool. Please pray with me.

Loving God, you created us to be in relationship with each other and also with you. In your awesome nature you seem so distant from us, so far from us, that it's hard for us to understand you. You transcend our understanding of relationship. But we know that in Jesus you come near and offer that closer relationship through him, through your powerful presence in the Holy Spirit. Open our hearts and minds to the scripture read and your word proclaimed. Help us to

accept the relationship you offer us. Amen.

The reason I couldn't have that special relationship with Patty was because our age difference separated us by too many years. While we lived just 100 feet apart, with me all of seven years old, and Patty a sixteen-year-old girl, the distance that separated us could have been measured in “light years.” That's how we might also describe our relationship with God. God is way out there while we are way down here.

God is transcendent. That means God is well beyond our ability to understand God. God created us male and female, but God transcends gender. God is neither male nor female. God is unmutable – we can't silence God. God defies our human boundaries: God is immovable, unchangeable, unstoppable. God is here and there at the same time. God is so awesome as to be unknowable.

Having said all that, God still wants a relationship with us. God desires to be in relationship with us. We were created to be in community which means we were created to be in relationships. Considering this transcendent nature of God, how then is it possible to be in a relationship with someone whom we can't understand, grasp or even see.

This is where Jesus enters into salvation history, the story of salvation. Jesus walked out of the tomb and

stepped into our lives. If God is transcendent then Jesus is immanent. Webster's Dictionary defines *immanent* as "remaining within; indwelling; inherent."¹ In Jesus, God comes near and remains to dwell within our hearts. This is the reason for the crucifixion and the resurrection. God sheds that transcendent nature and comes near to us through Jesus.

Jesus was a human being just like us. Well, perhaps not "just" like us. Scripture says he was free of sin which distinguishes him from us. But he was a real person. He was born with a belly button. As a baby he cried when he was hungry. Someone had to change his diapers. As a young boy he frustrated his parents when he was distracted with things not of this world. The Jesus of history lived and breathed and walked on this Earth just as we live and breathe and walk. The Jesus of history is someone we can relate to. History affirms that Jesus was real. He was real and he entered into many relationships during his earthly ministry. There is a quote from Jacques Ellul at the beginning of Chapter 6 in *The Shack* that makes this point.

*No matter what God's power may be, the first aspect of God is never that of the absolute Master, the Almighty. It is that of the God who puts himself on our human level and limits himself.*²

In Jesus God comes down to our level to offer us a relationship. But what does that relationship look like?

¹ Webster's College Dictionary. (Copyright © 1995, 1992, 1991 by Random House), page 672.

² William Paul Young. *The Shack* (Windblown Media, copyright © 2007 by William P. Young), page 88.

Last Wednesday evening I promised that I would reveal the real reason *The Shack* is a literary work that Christians need to not only read, but should also study. Here is that reason. Papa, Yeshua, and Sarayu – The Trinity – model the relationship God wants to have with us. In fact they model the relationship God would like for each of us to have with one another. The relationship is based on unconditional love and is about reconciliation – being reconciled with God through that unconditional love. The more we know about the relationship God desires, the more likely we are to accept God's offer.

And the relationship is always offered and never forced on us. Papa explains to Mack that, "It is not the nature of love to force a relationship but it is the nature of love to open up the way."³ So it should become more apparent that Jesus' forgiveness reconciles us with God and opens up the way for unconditional love. Once we accept God's forgiveness and that unconditional love, we are freed to move into a deeper, more meaningful relationship with God. That acceptance, by the way, also frees us to move into deeper relationship with others in our life.

If God desires to have a relationship with us, we might ask why we should want that relationship. From the earliest time, since we were given the ability to reason, humans have needed relationship. The earliest form of relationship in pre-history was essential for survival. Early humans realized the necessity of bonding together in bands or tribes, that is to say communities. Their survival depended on building relationships and community.

³ Ibid, page 192.

As we developed into a more “civil” society, relationship gave structure to our lives. We discovered that we needed structure to order our lives. Structure leads to hierarchy which gives way to laws, then rules, and finally, rights.

This need for structure creeps into our relationships. Hierarchy is established; and then come the rules and our rights. While our relationships may be founded on love, the love is not unconditional as God’s love is unconditional. While relationship may imply partnership, one partner is dominant. One partner is stronger. We may say the relationship with our spouse is equal, but unless the love is unconditional it can’t be equal. Our relationships are vertical, from the top down.

We need structure in our relationships because at our basic human level we are insecure, whether we realize it or not, whether we are willing to admit it or not. We are insecure because we have not yet learned to fully trust God for the structure we need. The problem with our relationships is we place our trust in our own selves rather than trusting fully in God.

The relationship God wants with us – the relationship God would like for us to have with each other – relies on God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit for its structure. The relationship God has in mind for us is horizontal not vertical. There is no single entity at the top because there is no top. As Mack spends the weekend in the presence of Papa, Yeshua, and Sarayu he becomes keenly aware of the horizontal nature of their relationship. I encourage you to read closely the beginning pages of Chapter 7.

Yeshua drops a large bowl of batter that spatters all over the kitchen and Papa. The scene Mack witnesses is revelation for him. All three – Papa, Yeshua, and Sarayu – break into uproarious laughter. Sarayu says something about humans being clumsy and the laughter continues to intensify. But immediately, both Yeshua and Sarayu began cleaning up the mess. Listen to Mack’s mental impression of what he saw:

*So this was God in relationship?
It was beautiful and so appealing.
He knew that it didn’t matter
whose fault it was – the mess
from some bowl that had been
broken, that a dish that had been
planned would not be shared.
Obviously, what was truly
important here was the love they
had for one another and the
fullness it brought them. He
shook his head. How different
this was from the way he treated
the ones he loved!⁴*

This is a direct reflection of the gospel reading we heard this morning. Jesus’ prayer for the disciples asks that they be one together “... just as you and I are one, Father – that just as you are in me and I am in you, so they will be in us ...” [John 17:21 *NLT*] The relationship God desires to have with each one of us is founded on forgiveness, unconditional love, and oneness with God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit.

As Mack’s relationship with the Trinity at the shack matures through the weekend, Yeshua explains more about the relationship God desires:

⁴ Ibid, page 107.

Genuine relationships are marked by submission even when your choices are not helpful or healthy. That's the beauty you see in my relationship with Abba and Sarayu. We are indeed submitted to one another and always have been so and always will be. Papa is as much submitted to me as I to him or Sarayu to me or Papa to her. Submission is not about authority and it is not obedience; it is all about relationships of love and respect. In fact, we are submitted to you in the same way.⁵

This is what the relationship God offers us looks like. To accept that offer is to realize and accept that God is pure unconditional love. In the reading from 1 John this morning we heard that "God is love, and all who live in love live in God, and God lives in them. [1 John 4:16b *NLT*]

In Jesus, God has opened the way to that relationship God desires to have with each one of us. We are confronted with the same question Mack must confront: "Are you willing to accept that relationship, to be one with God?"

⁵ Ibid, page 145

