In his fascinating book, *The Hidden Life of Trees*, Peter Wohlleben, drawing from his twenty years as a forester in Germany’s great forests tells us about what he came to learn of what takes place in a forest of trees. For the average human being what takes place in a forest is not a whole lot. Trees are these nearly inanimate plants that imperceptibly grow to the sky and move only at the whim of the wind. Yes, of course, they grow their leaves and seeds and shed them every year much to our dismay if we have to rake them, but other than all that — to our naked eyes are sort of these singular entities that don’t really have a life beyond what meets the eye. But I guess when you spend twenty years in a forest and you take the time to explore and probe and reflect and meditate and study what you discover is that there is a life within and around a grove of trees beyond what meets the eye. So what Mr. Wohlleben has discovered is that trees have this hidden life and that things are taking place among them that we never imagined. That underneath the soil, for example, trees of shared species conspire to intertwine their roots so that not only does each individual tree’s root system serve to support each individual tree — but that their roots together, intertwined, can serve to support the community of trees — especially those trees that are vulnerable. Some species of trees, like the acacia tree in Africa — when an animal like a giraffe chooses to start chewing on its leaves — first begins to pump from its roots toxic substances into those threatened leaves to keep the animal from continuing to destroy them, but then also sends out a scent from itself to warn all the other trees in the vicinity that we never imagined. That somehow in some mysterious way God was within Godself a relationship between these three persons. And that if we had any curiosity about the hidden life of the universe — the hidden life of being human — we might first start by realizing that God is not singular — God is plural. Not plural in the sense of neutrons, but in the relationship between them. That the deep, deep reality of being alive is in our relationship to each other. So much happens underneath and around what our naked eyes can see. There is an interrelatedness that our good friends the scientists are helping us to discover. When Edward Lorenz, for example, a meteorologist of a half-century ago, was using a numerical computer model to come up with a long term weather forecast decided to rerun the model changing the factor a fraction of a fraction of a fraction, an almost imperceptible change, but what resulted was a drastically different forecast. He realized that just a slight variation of factors significantly changes the outcome. It’s where we get the butterfly effect theory from. The smallest actions, the nearly imperceptible actions, can result in the largest of outcomes. That the flap of a butterfly’s wings over Africa can set off a chain reaction in the atmosphere to start a tornado spinning over Kansas. A butterfly and a tornado are actually connected in this hidden life of the atmosphere.

So what surrounds us is this hidden life of creation — this deeper reality that explains the greater meaning and purpose behind the world’s order. And it makes me wonder if that isn’t something that Jesus was trying to point us to when in the last hours of his life as recorded for us in John’s Gospel Jesus continued to speak over and over again about the relationship he had with the two other persons of what we now call the Trinity — the Heavenly Father and the Holy Spirit. That God was not a one-person God — that God was not some uniform being up there — that God was not simply the big guy in the sky — but that God was actually the interplay, the relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. That somehow in some mysterious way God was within Godself a relationship between these three persons. And that if we had any curiosity about the hidden life of the universe — the hidden life of being human — we might first start by realizing that God is not singular — God is plural. Not plural in the sense of their being three Gods, but plural in the sense that core of who God is is this relationship of persons. This love shared between the persons of the Trinity. That the deep, deep reality of being alive is in our relationship with the love expressed between and from the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Richard Rohr reminds us that “the energy in the universe is not in the planets, or in the protons or neutrons, but in the relationship between them.” *Perichoresis* is the expensive word that theologians use to describe the nature of God — *perichoresis* is this Greek word made up of two parts — “peri” meaning “circle” from which we get the words perimeter and periscope, and “choresis” from which we get the word “choreography” meaning “dance”. That God is this circle dance. God is this *perichoresis* — this circle dance of Father, Son and Holy Spirit — this community of mutuality. And that all of creation, all of existence, all of the universe contains this hidden life. That we are not individuals as much as we might want to think we are — but that we are who we are only in relationship with one another.

Einstein was on to this when he came up with his theory of relativity — that the law of the universe has something to do with our relativity to the speed of light. In spiritual terms the law of the universe, the hidden life of the universe has everything to do with our relationship to the love that begins and extends from the interplay of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. C.S. Lewis called it the Great Dance. The invisible reality of life is this dance that begins with God. This dance between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And it is in this dance and through this dance that God seeks to draw all of his creation into this life of relationship.

It makes me think of this wedding reception I was at a long time ago. Now I’ve been to a lot of wedding receptions, as you can imagine, and I have
developed a fairly discerning ear for what makes for a good reception band and a bad reception band. At this particular reception we were subjected to a bad reception band. Worse than bad. Awful. The dancefloor was empty because no music that they played could you dance to. So there we sat holding our ears, when up from one of the tables came this older gentleman walking across the dancefloor. It was the father of the groom. And in his sights was a young woman, a relative I imagine, and he grabbed her hand and took her out onto the dance floor and they started dancing to the undanceable music. And there we sat staring at this couple dancing. And when he could see we were staring he spun around to another table and grabbed a young guy and dragged him onto the floor and the three starting dancing. Not very well, mind you, but it didn’t matter. They were dancing. And before we knew it he grabbed another couple and another couple and before too long the dancefloor was full of people laughing and dancing. Laughing at the bad music but dancing in the spirit of the father. And what started as one of the worst receptions I had experienced – turned into this great party. And it makes me wonder that when Jesus talks to us about the perichoresis – the circle – the interplay of Father, Son and Holy Spirit – if he isn’t this dancer pulling us onto the dancefloor? This is what it really means to live. To join the great cosmic dance of relationship!!

It makes sense then that so much of Jesus’ teaching had to do with relationships. When he said to forgive each other seventy times seven – what he was saying was that to not forgive was to go against the hidden life of God which is in turn the hidden life of humans. If you choose to be out of relationship with another it’s like trying to defy the law of gravity. Gravity always wins. When Jesus reaches across all the taboo lines – and touches the untouchables he is saying that he needs to be in relationship with them because that’s who God is. When he says that when our neighbor asks for coat give him our shirt as well – or when he asks you to go one mile, go the second mile too – he’s saying it’s all about the perichoresis. It’s all about the dance. When Jesus is strapped to the cross and the chief priests and the teachers of the law are ridiculing him from below Jesus looks up to the Father and he says – Father, what we going to do with these people? What are we going to do? And Jesus says, how about we forgive them. How about we invite them whether they want to or not, how about we invite them into our dance of love. Everything is relative to the dance of love. It’s what came to mind when I read about the death of Steven McDonald a couple years ago. Steven McDonald that New York City policeman who was gunned down by a 15 year old – left a paraplegic for the rest of his life. After 18 months in the hospital he came home and prepared to be present at the baptism of his little boy who was born shortly after the shooting. And it was then in the moment of baptism that it dawned on him the hidden life of humans. That the connection he had to his little toddler boy meant that he also had a connection to that little adolescent boy who took so much from him. So he went on TV and said he loved both boys. Because they’re in the dance together. And that’s what set Officer McDonald on a mission to speak about forgiveness and reconciliation the rest of his life. After 18 months in the hospital he came home and prepared to be present at the baptism of his little boy who was born shortly after the shooting. And it was then in the moment of baptism that it dawned on him the hidden life of humans. That the connection he had to his little boy meant that he also had a connection to that little adolescent boy who took so much from him. So he went on TV and said he loved both boys. Because they’re in the dance together. And that’s what set Officer McDonald on a mission to speak about forgiveness and reconciliation the rest of his life. It’s all about the dance.

And isn’t that the great news? That everything is relative to the perichoresis – to the dance of love. So when Jesus gathers with his disciples on that last night … that last night when all hell was going to break loose and they were preparing to run – Jesus sits with his disciples and says to them, It’s OK. Because right here, right now, you are surrounded by the dance. The Father who has the many rooms sits with his disciples and says to them, It’s OK. Because right here, right now, you are surrounded by the dance. The Father who has the many rooms is here, the Advocate, the Comforter, the Holy Spirit – she is right here right now too. And together with the Son we form this circle, this dance, that encircles you and will pull you together and will teach you the hidden life of being human. And at the end of the day it’s all relative to the light, the love, the dance of God.

Don’t you wonder if heaven isn’t going to be like one of those good Jewish weddings where at the end of it all they all gather in a circle arms around each other singing Hava Nagila. And they sing and they dance and they look into each other’s eyes and because they’re family they’ve got their little gripes and grudges, but now they’re in the circle and they’re dancing and they are laughing and they are singing and they are giving thanks that they have each other. It’s not about me, it’s about us. It’s not about you, it’s about the dance. The hidden life of being human.

The Hidden Life of Humans
Dr. Stephen D. McConnell • June 16, 2019