A TRUSTWORTHY RELATIONSHIP

May 5, 2019

John 21:1-19

It’s not uncommon for a parent to say to a teenage child who has stayed out past an established curfew for the third time, “Once again, you have violated my trust in you and now you will have to figure out how to regain this trust.” In this statement, the emphasis is not on the rule that has been broken, but rather is on the relationship of trust that has been affected by the child not living up to the parent’s expectations. The same kind of dynamic can take place between spouses when one person is unfaithful and breaks the vow that was made between the two. The violation of trust rather than the actual deed often is the deeper hurt and is the part of the relationship that needs attention if this relationship has any hope of being restored.

Jesus had come to Peter 3 years earlier while Peter was fishing at the Sea of Galilee and had called Peter to follow him. In that moment, we are told that Peter dropped everything that he was doing and immediately left everyone behind to follow this itinerant preacher who had gathered quite a following. Over the course of the next 3 years, Jesus took Peter and the other disciples under his wings, tutored them in the will of God, and even sent them out 2-by-2 to practice what Jesus had taught them.

Based upon the few incidents that are recorded in the gospels, we know that Peter was a pretty brash person who often would speak or act before thinking and would end up putting his foot in his mouth only to be challenged by Jesus, reprimanded by Jesus, and even rebuked by Jesus. Case in point, on the night when Jesus was sharing a Passover meal with his disciples and told them that they all would end up abandoning him, Peter quickly reacted by telling Jesus that he would never leave Jesus’ side. At that point, Jesus told Peter that before the cock would crow that night, Peter would deny Jesus 3 times. As we all know how the story goes, that is exactly what happened.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Jesus would ask Peter, not once, but 3 times if Peter loved him. Given that Peter had denied that he had ever known Jesus 3 times on the night of Jesus’ trial, Jesus certainly was justified in putting Peter to the test and ascertaining Peter’s loyalty to Jesus now and in the future. The trust between Peter and Jesus had been broken and violated on that fateful night, and as such, Peter was going to have to earn back Jesus’ trust and convince him that he was ready and willing to take up the mantle of being a faithful disciple of Jesus and following through on all that Jesus expected of those who made a commitment to put their trust in him.

Understandably, Peter felt hurt by Jesus, because Jesus chose to question Peter’s loyalty 3 times. Once should have been enough as far as Peter was concerned. He already had learned his lesson the hard way about his disloyalty in denying Jesus when he heard that rooster crow in the wee hours of the morning. In that moment, Peter went out and wept bitterly, and began to live with the regret, the remorse, and the guilt over what he had done. The tears that he had shed on that fateful night were enough to begin the process of repentance that would challenge Peter as he would try to regain Jesus’ trust after Jesus’ resurrection from the dead about which we proclaim, “Alleluia! Christ is risen!” **Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Rather than thinking about our relationship with God or with Jesus in terms of covenants that we have to keep or commandments that we ought to obey, what if we thought about our relationship with the Divine in terms of following through on that with which we have been entrusted to do? Isn’t that how Jesus interacts with Peter in our gospel lesson for today? “Peter, if you love me, I trust that you will feed my lambs, tend my sheep, and feed my sheep.” All of those who eventually would be baptized and would decide to follow Jesus, whether newborn in the faith or life-long disciples, are now entrusted to Peter’s care and concern so that they also will know the love of God and experience the peace that comes with being filled with the Holy Spirit.

This same kind of entrusting relationship was described in the very beginning when God created humankind and instructed them to take care of the Earth, including all living creatures, and to tend the garden in which God had placed them. Think about it! According to this narrative, God had spent 5 days creating the entire universe and had declared that everything that God had made was good. So why would God entrust this marvelous creation to humankind unless God had the confidence that we human beings actually do have the capacity and the capability of taking care of all that God has made?

The same dynamic held true for the relationship between God Yahweh and the people of Israel and Judah. God called the people of Israel and Judah into a relationship and made a covenant with them that if they would obey God’s commandments, God would bless them, and if they disobeyed God’s commandments, God would curse them. In this situation, was it the promise of being blessed or the warning of being cursed that would be the crucial element to motivate the people to want to keep this covenant that God had made with them? If so, then the historical account shows that God’s promise and God’s warnings had negligible impact on the people, because the vast majority of their rulers did what was evil in the sight of God, and the vast majority of the people, from the least to the greatest, fell right in line with their kings throughout the centuries in undermining the trust of the relationship that God desired to have with them.

Throughout the course of time, laying down laws and threatening people with some kind of punishment if those laws were broken has demonstrated that this kind of arrangement may not be the best way to motivate people to do what is good, right, and just in the sight of God. It’s the relationship that really matters! As we heard in our gospel lesson last Sunday, Jesus appeared to his disciples twice in one week and greeted them a total of 3 times with the words, “Peace be with you.” This greeting was meant not only to alleviate their fears in that moment, but also to let them know that Jesus had forgiven them for abandoning him in his hour of need and assuring them that he held nothing against them. For Jesus, restoring the relationship that he had with his disciples was most important to him in order to re-establish the trust that he would place in them in the future—however they would choose to follow him.

As Jesus had indicated to his disciples on the night of his betrayal and now reiterates to Peter, Jesus’ disciples can expect to be persecuted and even put to death on account of Jesus’ name. All the more reason why Jesus wants to make sure that Peter and the rest of Jesus’ disciples will love Jesus and will put their trust in him, or more specifically in the Spirit whom Jesus has breathed on them. As Jesus also reminded his disciples on that fateful night, to love him meant that his disciples would love God with their entire being and would love all their neighbors in all of the ways that Jesus had taught them and demonstrated to them in the past 3 years—all of which would certainly lead them into being in conflict with the ways of this world.

As with Jesus’ first disciples, all of us who are baptized in Jesus’ name have entered into a precious but precarious relationship—one that we certainly have violated more than once in our lifetime. In fact, every day, in one way or another, we choose to love ourselves or love the things of this world more than we love Jesus. So, when Jesus repeatedly is asking Peter if Peter loves him, Jesus might as well be asking us the same question over and over again as a way of repeatedly saying to us, “Peace be with you, for I have forgiven you and will hold nothing against you until the next time that you violate the trust of our relationship and decide not to follow me. So, do you love me? Do you love me? Do you love me?” Yes, Jesus, you know that we love you and that we will do anything by the power of your Spirit to demonstrate our love for you by striving for justice and peace in all the Earth in the same non-violent way that you have taught us, revealed to us, and confirmed for us with your resurrection. Alleluia! Christ is risen! **Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!** Amen.