

RELATIONAL CHRISTIANITY

“And now these three abide: faith hope and love, and the greatest of these is love.” In these famous words, Paul affirmed what Jesus had told his disciples—that He had come to teach us how to love one another. *“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.”* (John 15:12) In these eight words, Jesus summarized the entire Law, just as Moses had summarized the first three Commandments as, *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind,”* (Deut. 6:5) and the last seven Commandments as, *“Love your neighbor as yourself.”* (Lev. 19:18) *“Do this,”* Jesus said, *“and you will live.”* (Luke 10:27-28) Love, we might say, is the heart and soul of Jesus’ teachings. We are saved by faith in His death and resurrection, and we have the hope of eternal life, but while we are in this world, we are commanded to love one another in truth and action. **And love exists only in relationships.** That is why the Bible constantly speaks in terms of relationships: God is our Father and Jesus is *“...the firstborn of many brothers.”* (Rom. 8:29) When we reduce Christianity to a philosophy, a set of logical propositions about man, God and the universe, we miss the whole point of the Gospel. Christianity is not about philosophy, it’s about relationships.

God loved us and He wants us to love each other. In God’s terms that means putting others first and ourselves second. The problem is that this runs counter to our natures because by nature we put ourselves first and others second. In order for us to put God and our neighbor first, our natures have to be changed and we can’t do that--the power to change our nature has to come from somewhere outside ourselves. That “somewhere” is the Holy Spirit of God acting upon our hearts.

All of this begins with faith: trust in God to do what He has promised to do for us. A person of faith not only believes in God—he trusts God to forgive his sins, to guide him through life, and to take him to heaven when he dies. After all, even the demons believe in God—and tremble. Faith is trust. Peter trusted that God would forgive him for denying Jesus, and he was restored. Judas despaired of forgiveness, and he committed suicide. Trust is essential to our relationship with God.

But trusting a God who tells us He loves us and then fails to protect us from the hard circumstances of life doesn’t necessarily come easily. How many times have you heard someone say, *“What kind of a God would allow THAT to happen?”* Maybe you’ve said it yourself—or at least thought it. We all know by now that having faith in Jesus Christ doesn’t necessarily mean that God is going to reward us with healthy, prosperous and successful lives—at least not in any worldly sense of the terms. Sometimes our ship comes in and sometimes it’s nowhere in sight. There are good times and there are bad times. *“[God] causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”* (Matt. 5:45)

So if God doesn’t necessarily shower us with goodies as a reward for trusting in Him but allows us to suffer along with the rest of humanity, how **do** we think about the relationship we have with Him? For that matter, why have a relationship with him at all? Paul tells us that, *“...in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called*

according to his purpose.” (Rom. 8:28) But if that doesn’t mean that God will make our life a bowl of cherries, then what DOES it mean? Does that mean that we can trust God to make good out of bad? Or does it make more sense to place certain conditions on our trust in God—like Jacob was inclined to do after God had promised to give him land and descendants and to continually watch over him. Jacob responded by saying, in effect: *“If you do all these things for me, O Lord, I will make you my God and give you a tenth of all that you give me.”* God—GOD!—gave Jacob an unconditional promise but Jacob preferred a two-way contract with an escape clause.

The truth is that living for the sake of other people doesn’t necessarily seem like a particularly smart thing to do because people don’t always return the favor. Sometimes we do nice things for people and they do nice things for us in return, but sometimes we do nice things for people and they turn around and spit in our face. Should we really sell all we have and give to the poor and go follow Christ? The rich young man couldn’t bring himself to do it in spite of his perfect knowledge of the *Torah* and faith in its wisdom. Wouldn’t a safer and more practical path be to “regulate” our relationship with God by trusting him only up to a point and then trusting ourselves to take care of the rest? By regulating our relationships with others by setting clear boundaries that govern our involvement with them and then leaving it to them to take care of the rest? In other words, isn’t our best bet is to look after ourselves first? It makes sense, doesn’t it? It just isn’t trust.

The problem with both these responses—to God and to our neighbor—is that it leaves our primary focus on **ourselves**. But this amounts to Luther’s *curvatus in se*: turning in on ourselves, which is what sin always leads us to do.

The Biblical pattern of Christian living takes us in a completely different direction. According to the Bible, self-centeredness is the essence of sin and must be revoked. *“If anyone would come after me he must **deny himself**, take up his cross daily and follow me.”* (Luke 9:23) (No matter how many times we try to forget that verse or try to make it say something other than what it obviously means, it keeps coming back to haunt us.) And its sequel—*“For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.”* (Luke 9:24)—is no easier.

The fact remains: either we put ourselves first, or we put God and our neighbor first. Our natures incline us to do the former; the Biblical pattern is the latter: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength”* and *“love your neighbor as yourself”*: hard to hear but absolutely clear.

God designed us to be relational, not mechanical creatures. We are not just broken mechanisms that need fixing by God, however much we may like to think of ourselves that way—we are designed to live in relationships where we help fix each other—however messy and unpredictable and often disappointing as that may be. That means that our sanctification—the process of growing up as Christians in a fundamentally un-Christian world—can only take place in terms of relationships.

Luther said that pastors are formed through three things: prayer, study and struggle. I think the same thing can be said of any Christian. We grow in our relationship with God by praying to Him, by studying His Word, and by struggling with our own sinful nature. We grow in our relationships with others by praying for them, studying their needs, and striving to love them in truth and action.

When I went off to seminary, I had a goal in mind. My goal was to learn everything there was to know about the Bible so that after I graduated I would be a walking encyclopedia of the Bible. Then when I became a pastor, if a member of my church asked me anything about God or man or sin or salvation or prophecy or whatever—I would just go to “page 1129” of the encyclopedia in my head and pull up the answer. And I worked hard at it. I read everything—everything!—that was assigned in my courses—and a lot more. And I emerged with something like a Bible encyclopedia in my head, anxious to “get to pastoring.” I couldn’t wait for the questions to come! And then the first question I got was from a woman in the congregation who called me one Sunday afternoon and asked: “*Are you mad at me?*” I said, “*What on earth made you think that?*” “*Well,*” she said, “*I thought you gave me a funny look this morning.*” After assuring her that I wasn’t mad at her I remember thinking, “Is THIS what pastoral ministry is going to be like? Convincing people I’m not mad at them? Where were the theological questions I had been hoping for?”

Well. That was a shot across the bow of a lesson I had to learn in a hurry: People weren’t interested in theology; they were interested in their relationships with other people. My job was to convince them that their relationships with other people had to start with a relationship with God. I couldn’t tell them how to get along as a friend or spouse or employee or mother or father or child: all I could do is encourage them in every way I could think of to make sure they had a relationship with their Heavenly Father through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ, **so that He could help them**. And over the years I have become more and more convinced that if we get that relationship right—a relationship of trust on our part and grace on His—He will teach us how to love one another in truth and actions.

Now I’m going to switch gears on you in order to talk about a very special relationship: the relationship between a mother and her child.

This last week was the forty-fifth anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, the Supreme Court decision that legalized abortion. The damage this decision has done to our society is incalculable. First, of course, is the lethal damage that has been done to tens of millions of infants who have never lived to see the light of day. But equally grievous is the damage done to women who have undergone this procedure. Of all the relationships we have with people in this world, the mother’s relationship to her child is probably the closest. Every pregnant woman is a co-creator of life with God. To deny that fact is to deny both temporal and eternal reality. And so our Synod has declared this Sunday to be “Sanctity of life” Sunday, a day when we proclaim in clear and unequivocal terms that we believe every conceived child is a child of God who deserves to live.

In the course of my pastoral ministry I have had women who have had abortions come to me as their pastor and ask me if God will forgive them for having terminated their pregnancies. My response has always been: He already has. Like every other sin it was paid for on the cross. So if you have had an abortion and it troubles you, take heart: your sin is completely washed away. Through your relationship with God, He has forgiven every sin you have ever committed—or ever will commit. “*Sin shall no longer be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace.*” (*Rom. 6:14*)

Amen

Deuteronomy 15:1-11 The Sabbatical Year

15 “At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release.² And this is the manner of the release: every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbor. He shall not exact it of his neighbor, his brother, because the LORD's release has been proclaimed.³ Of a foreigner you may exact it, but whatever of yours is with your brother your hand shall release.⁴ But there will be no poor among you; for the LORD will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance to possess—⁵ if only you will strictly obey the voice of the LORD your God, being careful to do all this commandment that I command you today.⁶ For the LORD your God will bless you, as he promised you, and you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow, and you shall rule over many nations, but they shall not rule over you.

⁷ “If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother,⁸ but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be.⁹ Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart and you say, ‘The seventh year, the year of release is near,’ and your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the LORD against you, and you be guilty of sin.¹⁰ You shall give to him freely, and your heart shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake.¹¹ For there will never cease to be poor in the land. Therefore I command you, ‘You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in your land.’

Psalms 32 Blessed Are the Forgiveness A Maskil of David.

32 Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.

² Blessed is the man against whom the LORD counts no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

³ For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.

⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Selah

⁵ I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not cover my iniquity;
I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,”
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah

⁶ Therefore let everyone who is godly
offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found;
surely in the rush of great waters,
they shall not reach him.

⁷ You are a hiding place for me;

you preserve me from trouble;
you surround me with shouts of deliverance. Selah

⁸ I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go;
I will counsel you with my eye upon you.

⁹ Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding,
which must be curbed with bit and bridle,
or it will not stay near you.

¹⁰ Many are the sorrows of the wicked,
but steadfast love surrounds the one who trusts in the LORD.

¹¹ Be glad in the LORD, and rejoice, O righteous,
and shout for joy, all you upright in heart!

Romans 8:26-30

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. ²⁷ And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. ²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

Matthew 7:7-12 Ask, and It Will Be Given

⁷ “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. ⁹ Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? ¹¹ If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!

The Golden Rule

¹² “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.