

TRICON
EDUCATION

SMALL GROUPS

2018 Lenten Series

TENDING

THE *garden*

of Relationships

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Tending the *garden* of Relationships

Right out of the gate, in the first three chapters of Genesis, we learn the central plot of the entire human endeavor. We are wonderfully created to love God, creation, and one another in complete freedom and abounding joy. In other words our very purpose for being is to thrive in loving relationship with God and one another. Yet, from chapter four on, history repeatedly demonstrates how we humans tend to prize our distinct individual independence at the cost of ignoring the deeper truth - for better or worse we are completely interdependent on one another.

To be human is to be in relationship with others. Science has determined that strong healthy relationships are essential for a happy, healthy, and productive life. The quality of our relationships is a key determiner of our quality of life. We find

our physical, emotional and spiritual fitness is directly linked to the condition of our interpersonal connections.

Our Christian tradition teaches us that even God's self is best understood as relational perfection. We view God as three "persons" existing in one mutually harmonious, indivisible communion. The Trinitarian model of God is like a continuously flowing waterwheel; each vessel is fully filled up by the other, only to empty out completely into the next. Like cups in the waterwheel, we receive only as much as we are willing to give. This Trinitarian expression of God is the ultimate expression of agape love. Also, this Divine pattern of mutual interdependent relationship is reflected in every aspect of creation.

Our 5-part Lenten series examines how we view our relationships with one another and with God through the lens of scripture, the teachings of Jesus and our own experience. Engaging in these discussions, perhaps we will discover a deeper understanding of how Christ literally comes alive in the communion between us! Together, as we tend to this textured and diverse garden of interwoven relationships, perhaps we will find new beauty in God's exquisite relational design and behold the wonder and goodness of our shared, inextricably linked, common humanity. It's time to get back to the garden!

Bob

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Tending the *garden* of Relationships

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WEEK ONE

How Would Jesus Have Us Relate to Family?



Main Point: Our understanding of family relationships greatly shapes our understanding of God.

Idea: Our family of origin (or lack of one) has a profound impact on how we view ourselves, how we form other relationships, and even how we behave in the world. How might our family relationships impact our understanding of God and the way we relate to God? The Bible is filled with shocking stories of scandalous family drama, serious domestic dysfunction, and what we might easily read as misogynistic moralism coupled with barbaric parental guidance. Yet, Scripture also uses the family model as the primary metaphor for our relationship with God. Through Scripture and personal experience we can form models of a healthy family that will nurture God's desire for us to live in vulnerable, intimate, and loving relationships with one another.

Matthew 6:9 *"Our father who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name."*

Exodus 20: 12 *"Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you."*

Colossians 3: 18-20 *“Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.”*

21st century Concord is very different from 1st century Palestine. The Bible provides instruction for functioning families, and oftentimes final authority is given to the man of the household.

Is there value in this traditional view of family (husband/father as decision maker), with set hierarchies and clear responsibilities?

Does gender alone qualify one for a particular role?

How did gender roles function in your family growing up? What about your family now?

Today, the idea of family is far more diverse than in Biblical times. Is a traditional Biblical view of family increasingly important or less relevant, given today’s diverse families?

Now read aloud all of Colossians chapter 3:

Colossians 3: *“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you once*

walked, when you lived in them. But now put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scyth'ian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all. Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another in all wisdom, and sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and do not be harsh with them. Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, lest they become discouraged."

What is the overriding theme of chapter 3?

Does the meaning of verses 18-20 change given the broader context of the entire chapter?

John 1:12-13 *"But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."*

Romans 8:15-17 *“But you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, Abba! Father! it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.”*

John 13: 34 *“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.”*

How does the “family model” work in your relationship with God?

How does your relationship with your father impact your view of “God the Father”?

Do you see yourself as a beloved “child of God?” How is that lived out in your life?

Is it possible that changing your perception of God will change your perception of life?

In what sense can church function like family? Is that always a good thing?

Ideally what can church do better to nurture positive family like relationships?

“You don’t choose your family. They are God’s gift to you, as you are to them.” --Desmond Tutu

“I have learned that to be with those I like is enough.”
--Walt Whitman

While relatively little is written about this, each of the Gospels, the book of Acts, and several epistles mention Jesus’s immediate family and siblings and how he interacts with them as an adult. Whether these siblings are Mary’s biological children has been

debated and, among others, the Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church and Martin Luther have believed that these siblings may have been children from a previous marriage of Joseph (the Bible does not state Joseph was married to anyone else) or perhaps nephews and nieces of Mary and Joseph.

Mark provides names to Jesus's brothers and Mark references Jesus's sisters. James may have been the most prominent of these siblings and he is mentioned several times in the New Testament.

Mark 6: 1-6 *"He went away from there and came to his own country; and his disciples followed him. And on the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue; and many who heard him were astonished, saying, 'Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him? What mighty works are wrought by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offense at him. And Jesus said to them, 'A prophet is not without honor, except in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house.'"*

Jesus's view of family was expansive and extended well beyond biological relations. Here, Jesus indicates that it is those who follow the will of God, as best they can, who constitute family.

Matthew 12: 46-50 *"While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother.'"*

Are you surprised Jesus had brothers and sisters?

Does this information make Jesus even more human,
more accessible?

Does your view of family extend beyond your biological
relations?

Feel free, if you like, to reflect over some of what you have
discussed, in silence or in prayer.

You may also wish to discuss some of these themes for perhaps
five minutes, one-on-one, with the person sitting next to you.

**“Give the ones you love wings to fly, roots to come back
and reasons to stay.” --Dalai Lama**

“I sustain myself with the love of family.” --Maya Angelou

WEEK TWO

*How Would Jesus
Have Us Relate
in Friendship?*



Main Point: Friendships come in all kinds, and are forged between all sorts of people. The example and teachings of Jesus invite us to experience the transformative potential of friendship.

Idea: Friendships are special relationships. They are voluntary, unlike relationships with our parents or children, with our boss, or with a neighbor; the power dynamics are more mutual. They are often set up between peers and on the basis of shared interests and goals. Friendships can be limited in terms of length and geography, or they may last a lifetime and reach across physical distance.

“Make new friends, yet keep the old; one is silver and the other gold.” -- sung in Youth Group and Girl Scouts

We appreciate friendships because they are often uncomplicated, safe, and comfortable. Yet friends do not have to be alike in gender, class, or race, nor do they necessarily see eye-to-eye on matters. It is possible to be friends and have fun with amazingly diverse people!

“It is one of the blessings of old friends that you can afford to be stupid with them.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson

Of course, some friendships become challenged and troubled; they may end abruptly upon disagreement and betrayal, or perish from neglect. In some cases, though, the bond between friends is strengthened as they work through conflict.

John 21:16 (NRSV): *“[Jesus] said to him: ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’”*

Scientists have conjectured that the origin of friendship was physical survival. Human beings and even animals needed to form families, friendships, and covenants with each other to stay alive. Over time, these alliances developed into communal systems of protection, which allowed friendships to contribute to psychological survival.

“21st century friendships are soul friendships...supporting each other to live a life that is full of purpose, courage, and creativity.” – Dr. Robert Holden

Childhood friendships are mostly about playing well together in close proximity. They can also be the beginning of problem-solving and empathy, so that in middle school, when children may experience peer rejection, the path of growth is in being a friend over having friends. In adolescence, friendships become more reciprocal and are potentially antidotes to risky behaviors. The majority of adults have an average of two close friends, and as we age, friendships improve our mental and physical health.

An Inventory of Your Friendships

Make a short list of your friends.

What types of friendships did you include in this list?

Is one or more of them a “best” friend?

Do you consider your spouse or partner, if you have one, a friend?

How diverse are the people that you call friends? How important is sameness?

Are any of your friends associated with church; do you have your religious faith in common with your friends, or not?

Have any of your friendships survived conflict?

Are any of them in need of attention and nurture at this time?

Proverbs 18:24 (NRSV): *“Some friends play at friendship but a true friend sticks closer than one’s nearest kin.”*

Faith and Friendship

Friendships are not unrelated to our faith. Indeed, friendships are a gift from God – relationships that help us mature and grow in service and mission. We are changed by friendships, both secular and faith ones. They have transformative potential for us personally, for the larger community, and potentially even for the world!

We find many stories of friends in the Bible. You might choose one of these pairs and look them up to learn more:

Naomi and Ruth (Ruth 1)

David and Jonathan (1 Samuel 18)

Elijah and Elisha (1 Kings 19:19f)

Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego (Daniel)

Mary and Elizabeth (Luke 1)

Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13-15)

Priscilla and Aquila (Acts 18)

James 2:23 (NRSV): *“Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, ‘Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,’ and he was called the friend of God.”*

Have you ever regarded your relationship with the Divine as a friendship?

What is comfortable about this idea and uncomfortable about it?

Certainly Abraham was changed by his friendship with God. And you? If so, in what ways?

Jesus had friends. Remember Lazarus, Mary, and Martha? He stayed at their place, ate with them, and conversed. Jesus knew them well enough to speak frankly with Martha, and he wept over Lazarus before calling him forth from the tomb (**John 11**).

The religious authorities also criticized Jesus for *“being a friend of tax collectors and sinners”* (**Luke 7:34**). As one example, Jesus developed a friendship with Zacchaeus after calling him out of the tree and inviting himself over to supper (**Luke 19**). We know that Zacchaeus was changed by this relationship with Jesus. He made amends to those he had defrauded and became honest in his work.

Do you think the friendship between Zacchaeus and Jesus also transformed Jesus in some way?

How have your friendships changed you for the better?

Jesus' Teachings on Friendship

John 15:14 (NRSV): *"You are my friends if you do what I command you."*

It seems as if the disciples went through stages in their relationships with Jesus. First they were attracted to him and followed him as a charismatic miracle worker. Then they thought of themselves as his students/disciples. Toward the end of his ministry, Jesus said they were no longer servants, but friends, because he had shared with them all that God had revealed to him, and he enjoined them as friends to love one another. A friendship with Jesus Christ transforms us into more loving people.

Does this last point ring true to you?

Does it seem right to think of the church as a community of faith friends?

Is this idea different than just having church friends?

John 15:13 (NRSV): *"No one has greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends."*

Jesus laid down his life for the disciples, for you, and me – and indeed for the world. Thus he introduces into the nature of friendship the earmark of selfless care and the willingness to sacrifice for others. Good friends are marked by the support they give to each other, going out of their way to help a friend who is battling cancer, or is in a financial bind, or is in need of

a listening ear. Many of you could tell a story about how friends have saved your life.

You might not think twice about risking your own life in order to save your child's, but what kind of friendship would motivate the same sacrifice?

What would have to transform in you to become such a loving friend?

How might a friendship with Jesus Christ enable such a transformation?

What if you were to nurture this friendship during Lent?

A final thought to ponder:

“I believe that God is calling us to a new and more intense form of mission activity in the world today – not to convert the world to our own religion, but to convert the world toward friendship. Religions must become friends with one another, working cooperatively with people of other religions toward deeper forms of common good.”

– Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, Process-relational theologian

WEEK THREE

*How Would Jesus
Have Us Relate
with Marginalized People?*



Main Point: A cornerstone of our Christian faith is our commitment to act as Jesus acted: to reach out to our neighbors near and far, to help those in need, to treat others the way we would want to be treated. Jesus' many interactions with marginalized people provide a model of how he urges us to live our lives.

Idea: The New Testament is filled with stories of those that Jesus helped, even over the protests of his disciples. Let's examine this story of the Canaanite Woman.

Matthew 15:21-28 (ESV): *“And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, ‘Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.’ But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, ‘Send her away, for she is crying out after us.’ He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ But she came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’ And he*

answered, 'It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.' She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' Then Jesus answered her, 'O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.' And her daughter was healed instantly."

So this Gentile woman from a seaside town between Syria and Phoenicia recognized Jesus and even knew of Him as the Messiah. Her love for her daughter was so great that she gambled that he might help a stranger from away. His answer, that he was sent to save the Jews, did not deter her, and she fell at His feet, asking for healing for her daughter. When Jesus tested her by suggesting that his help was only for the children of Israel, she plead that even dogs (heathens) have a place in God's kingdom. What were the disciples thinking as they watched this? They must have expected Jesus to simply work a miracle so they could continue on. Instead, this woman had to demonstrate her great faith and humility, consider what Jesus said, and then refute his argument while continuing to ask for his help. And she was rewarded for her faithfulness: her daughter was healed from afar!

What marginalized group might the Canaanite woman represent in today's culture?

Why do you think Jesus said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel?"

What might the disciples have meant when they said, "she is crying out after us?"

Why do you think Jesus chose to work this miracle?

Idea: We have people all around us living on the margins of our society. There are stories told of those who reach out to them, from Mother Teresa to ministers on the Boston Common and

a Vietnam veteran in Brocton. Our collective vision for TriCon includes seeking more opportunities for service projects.

How would Jesus have us relate to those we serve, and what would he have us learn about our own faith from the miracles he performed?

"When a poor person dies of hunger, it has not happened because God did not take care of him or her. It has happened because neither you nor I wanted to give that person what he or she needed." — Mother Teresa, Roman Catholic nun

When John the Baptist sent two of his disciples to Jesus because their faith was shaky, Jesus used an hour to heal many, including those two disciples.

Luke 7:18-23 (ESV): *"The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, 'Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?' And when the men had come to him, they said, 'John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"' In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. And he answered them, 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers[e] are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.'"*

Who are the marginalized people in our lives today? As a group, you might want to make a list of those people. Start with the disabled, the mentally ill, people in prison,

Muslims, ..., and see what you add.

Now think of a time when you were asked to work with or help someone considered marginalized.

What did you discover about the person you were helping? What did you learn about yourself?

Think of a time when you were the marginalized person. Did anyone reach out to you?

Has there been a time when you failed to reach out, when the distance was too far? Did you learn anything from that experience?

Idea: Do you ascribe to the principle that God expects much from those of us to whom much has been given, as is put forth in Luke 12:48? If so, is there more to it than just distributing God's gifts more equitably? Is there a greater message for us? Why would Jesus spend so much time reviewing this lesson of embracing the marginalized? By way of seeking answers, let us explore two Bible verses and a story from Hurricane Katrina.

Matthew 19:16-24 (the story of the rich young man) (ESV):
"And behold, a man came up to him, saying, 'Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?' And he said to him, 'Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments.' He said to him, 'Which ones?' And Jesus said, 'You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' The young man said to him, 'All these I have kept. What do I still lack?' Jesus said to him, 'If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.' When the young man heard

this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. And Jesus said to his disciples, 'Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.'"

1 John 3:17 (ESV): *"But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?"*

This is a difficult challenge to Christians who live with more than others do. How do we share what we have been given? Certainly, giving of our time and talents in addition to giving our treasure is the model Jesus set forth. His healing the afflicted might be our ministering to the hungry at a food pantry or community supper or garden. But is it enough, when we keep a large portion of our riches for our family?

"You can't comfort the afflicted without afflicting the comfortable." — Diana, Princess of Wales

What if we would not be perfect, but try our best to walk in Christ's path?

Is our trying enough? Does God expect perfection?

What might be gained in building relationships with the disenfranchised?

What might you lose or have to give up?

You might wish to discuss some of these questions one-on-one with the person sitting next to you.

Here's a thought: what if Jesus is giving us this key to his kingdom - to minister unto the marginalized people, love THEM

as yourself -- not only because telling us to acknowledge and treat people who are "other" helps them, but also because it is his gift to us: the one thing that allows us to reach our full humanity and be truly happy? What if reaching out to those who are not like us and those who face terrible hardship is the way for us to discover our best selves? Sometimes these opportunities find us; and other times we are challenged to seek them out. Here is a story from a nurse who was chosen:

*From Faith and Leadership: 8/20/2010
Three Stories from Katrina: Alice Craft-Kerney*

Alice was a nurse at a local health clinic in the Ninth Ward that was destroyed by Katrina. After 6 months, she was without a job and looking for a way out. Then a series of signs helped her find a different way. First, a friend: *"Well Alice, you have a health care background. Why don't you do the clinic?"* After a fundraising success, Alice was beginning to consider that. Then, in Alice's words...

"One day I went to City Park, where there was a big relief operation. But when I got there, they were closed. So I asked the lady who was overseeing, "I was wondering if I could get a case of water?" She said, "Follow me," then led me to an area where people were restocking. She yelled out, "Everybody! Turn around! See this lady? You see her? Whenever you see this lady, you give her whatever she wants and however much she wants." And I kid you not, when I left that day, my car was loaded down. When I got back to the clinic, people came out and asked, "What's all this?" and I said, "Nothing but the hand of God." So that was the third confirming sign, and I knew the Lord had put a call on my life.

It has been a huge effort. Over 2,500 people have come through our doors. People were dying because they could not get to a doctor, because they could not get routine medications. Those

without insurance were in most need, and they were the ones we served.

God has given me such a sensitivity. I feel the pain of the people so deeply. Sometimes I just cry. The depraved indifference. The lack of progress is shameful. But every time I start wavering in my faith, the Lord won't let it happen.

What I've learned from Katrina, as a receiver and as a giver, is that when you are showing kindness, people can feel you being used by a higher power. God is present and touches lives. It is the way of Christian leadership. Kindness is the command and kindness is the promise God gives when he puts a call on your life."

If you could talk with Alice today, what question would you ask her?

Have you ever experienced "being used by a higher power?"

Can you recognize any gifts God has given to you through your acts of kindness, compassion and outreach?

"The Bible insists that the best test of a nation's righteousness is how it treats the poorest and most vulnerable in its midst." — Jim Wallis, Christian writer and social activist

"I believe that if you show people the problems and you show them the solutions they will be moved to act." — Bill Gates, business magnate and philanthropist

WEEK FOUR

*How Would Jesus
Have Us Relate with
Secular Authority?*



Main Point: There are several ways we can think spiritually about relating to the many secular authorities in our lives.

Idea: We are all subject to a number of secular authorities: parental authority, school authority, sports coaches and leaders of various organizations to which we belong, the authority of our boss/manager/company, the several levels of government authority, among others. For each type of authority, one should consider the underlying source of the authority (i.e., the way the authority is given legitimacy) and why we should or should not be subject to that authority. Of prime importance here is the difference between secular and spiritual authority. To start working on ways to think about all of this, consider the well-known exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees about paying tribute taxes to Rome:

Matthew 22:15-22 (NIV): *“Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. ‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘we*

know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?' But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, 'You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.' They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, 'Whose image is this? And whose inscription?' 'Caesar's,' they replied. Then he said to them, 'So give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.' When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away."

This exchange touches on secular versus spiritual authority and lays out the way that Jesus would have us relate to secular authority. Yet it is not so plain in its actual meaning or in how it is to be interpreted and applied to the present day. In this session we will explore this further. We will first lay some groundwork with more general Biblical notions about authority.

Each of us is subject to a number of secular authorities, and we ourselves are often in positions of authority over others.

Exodus 20:12 (NRSV): *"Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you."*

Ephesians 6:1 (NRSV): *"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right."*

Colossians 3:22 (NRSV): *"Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord."*

Romans 13:1 (NRSV): *“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.”*

Make a mental list of the people and/or institutions that are in positions of authority over you.

What are the sources of authority for each one?

Which do you consider secular authorities? Which do you consider spiritual authorities? Which are both?

In what ways are you in positions of authority over others?

What is the source of your authority in these relationships?

Concord has its own heralded tradition of questioning and challenging authority -- from the Minutemen fighting the British in the Battle of Concord, to the transcendentalist literary movement of the 19th century. In July 1846, Henry David Thoreau spent one night in jail for refusing to pay his poll tax in protest against slavery and the Mexican War. Thoreau lectured in 1848 on the subject “On the Relation of the Individual to the State” and wrote his defining famous essay “Civil Disobedience.” This essay became the foundation for the principle of nonviolent resistance by Mahatma Gandhi, which later was adopted by Martin Luther King, Jr. and others in the U.S. civil rights movement.

“Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience then? I think that we should be men first, and

subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, so much as for the right. The only obligation which I have a right to assume is to do at any time what I think right.” -- Henry David Thoreau, Civil Disobedience

Under what circumstances do you think it is right/ appropriate to disobey government authority?

When do you think it is right to disobey other authorities?

Do you have a story about challenging authority on moral grounds?

Under what circumstances do you think it is wrong to disobey government or other authorities?

During what we call Holy Week, Jesus entered the Temple and was enraged with what he saw. He overturned the tables of the money changers and drove out the vendors, which was a clear challenge to the current religious authorities. A little while later the Gospels record the following exchange:

Matthew 22:15-22 (NIV): *“Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. ‘Teacher,’ they said, ‘we know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?’ But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, ‘You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.’ They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, ‘Whose image is this? And whose inscription?’ ‘Caesar’s,’ they replied. Then he said to them, ‘So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God*

what is God's.' When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away."

Note that Jesus' statement "give back to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" is not a simple narrative principle in isolation. Rather, Jesus is (cleverly) responding to a question specifically designed to entrap him. If he says to not pay the tax tribute to Rome, he is committing treason against Rome (which is punishable by crucifixion). If he says to pay the tax tribute, he is then a pawn of the Roman government, a hypocrite hardly worthy of his zealous following.

The denarius is a tribute or tax coin, used for the purpose of paying tribute to Rome. The fact that Jesus's interrogators had an idolatrous coin with its "graven image" of the emperor, and in the Temple precincts no less, immediately convicted them of blasphemy and put Jesus at a rhetorical advantage. It is sort of like an anti-gambling zealot carrying poker chips at a Gamblers Anonymous meeting!

Jesus could have said simply "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's" and stopped there. But he specifically added the following parallel command to all of us:

"Give back to God what is God's."

What does this command mean to you?

What does God own or "have"? (things?, land?, dominion?, institutions?, authority?, other?...

What are we to give back to God?

How can we give back to God what is God's?

Why do you think Jesus specifically given this command in this specific context?

If you choose to, now might be a good time to silently reflect -- perhaps for several minutes -- upon what you have been discussing. You might also wish to discuss some of these themes one-on-one with the person sitting next to you.

Although we usually do not associate him with Biblical scholarship, Thoreau specifically offered an insightful interpretation of the exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees in Civil Disobedience as follows:

“Christ answered the Herodians according to their condition. ‘Show me the tribute-money,’ said he; – and one took a penny out of his pocket; – If you use money which has the image of Caesar on it, and which he has made current and valuable, that is, if you are men of the State, and gladly enjoy the advantages of Caesar’s government, then pay him back some of his own when he demands it; ‘Render therefore to Caesar that which is Caesar’s and to God those things which are God’s’ – leaving them no wiser than before as to which was which; for they did not wish to know.” –Henry David Thoreau

Interestingly, Gandhi too had an interpretation of the meaning of the exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees:

“Jesus evaded the direct question put to him because it was a trap. He was in no way bound to answer it. He therefore asked to see the coin for taxes. And then said with withering scorn, ‘How can you who traffic in Caesar’s coins and thus receive what to you are benefits of Caesar’s rule refuse to pay taxes?’ Jesus’ whole preaching and practice point unmistakably to noncooperation, which necessarily includes nonpayment of taxes.” --Mohandis Gandhi

What do you think of Thoreau's commentary on the exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees?

What do you think of Gandhi's interpretation of the exchange?

What is your own interpretation of the exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees?

How does your faith inform your relationship to authority?

WEEK FIVE

*How Would Jesus
Have Us Relate to
God?*



Main Point: God has created us to be in an active and vibrant communal relationship with the Divine. We each have been wonderfully made and are fully capable of living in the fullness and freedom that comes with nurturing that connection.

Idea: Genesis tells us that we were created in the image and likeness of God and blessed with the Spirit of life. This is the original blessing. Every human being comes to life filled with blessing and goodness, in full possession of the divine nature.

Genesis 1:26-28: *“Then God said, ‘Let us make the human in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ So God created the human in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them.”*

1John 7-16: *“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us,*

that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

Our connection and relationship with God begins in the perfect wholeness of absolute love. To be made in the image and likeness of God is to actually be love itself because God is love. The core identity of every human being is found and nurtured as we love one another. This means that when we love one another, the divine nature of God is actually manifested through and in our physical universe! To see God is to see the beauty of love in action. Jesus is the flesh and blood model of love in action. He demonstrates how expansive and all encompassing love is. When we study the Gospels and follow in the way of Jesus we find that God's love is not at all dependent on right belief, adhering to a moral code or even good behavior. Establishing a relationship with God is simply awakening to the reality of an endless grace that we can only receive and then give away to others.

Can you describe your perception of God?

Would you identify yourself as God's beloved?

How is your love of God expressed in your life?

What prevents you from deepening your relationship with God?

Idea: The core meaning of loving God is daring to trust that God could, will, and does have eternal compassion toward you. To love God we must trust God with our fears and uncertainties. Loving God with all our soul means to live at the soul level, deep within our true self – and in there we find God.

Matthew 22:34-40: *“When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”*

What does it mean to love God with all your heart, soul and mind?

Do you trust that God has eternal compassion toward you even when you are less than perfectly holy?

Is it possible to love your neighbor as yourself? How have you dealt with hard-to-love neighbors?

“Trusting is another one of those great ideas until we have to do it. In fact, trusting God never gets easy.” --Scot McKnight

“We must turn the compass point of the heart back again to where God waits for us, arms open, full of mercy, made

of love, to be our own best selves— not for our own sake alone but for the sake of the rest of the world.” --Joan Chittister

On Loving God, written by St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) is one of the best-known and most influential works of Medieval Christian mysticism. St. Bernard describes the four “levels” of love for God, and puts Christian devotion in the context of God’s love for humankind.

1. We Love ourselves for our own sake
2. We Love God for our own sake
3. Love God for God’s sake
4. Love ourselves for the sake of God

Love of any kind directs our path toward the presence of God. The further along the path we go, the more we find that we can actually live in the presence of God here on earth. Trusting in God’s deep well of grace frees us of guilt and teaches us to “love ourselves for the sake of God.” Nearly 300 years ago, a humble monk named Brother Lawrence was made famous when a short book of his conversations and letters was published. The Practice of the Presence of God quickly became a classic and to this day his practical wisdom continues to inspire Christians who want to know how to love God purely and completely. Consider the following excerpts from his book:1

“Brother Lawrence said that he was always guided by love. He was never influenced by any other interest, including whether or not he was saved. He was content doing the smallest chore if he could do it purely for the love of God.”

“When he sinned, he confessed it to God with these words: ‘I can

do nothing better without You. Please keep me from falling and correct the mistakes I make.’ After that, he did not feel guilty about the sin.”

“Brother Lawrence pointed out that he spoke very simply and frankly to God. He asked for help with things as he needed it, and his experience had been that God never failed to respond.”

Listing his essential practices for the spiritual life, Brother Lawrence writes,

“The most holy and necessary practice in our spiritual life is the presence of God. That means finding constant pleasure in His divine company, speaking humbly and lovingly with Him in all seasons, at every moment, without limiting the conversation in any way. This is especially important in times of temptation, sorrow, separation from God, and even in times of unfaithfulness and sin. We must try to converse with God in little ways while we do our work; not in memorized prayer, not trying to recite previously formed thoughts. Rather, we should purely and simply reveal our hearts as the words come to us.”

What practices help you to increase your relationship with God?

How do you notice the presence of God in your life?

What simple changes can you practice to deepen your relationship with God?

“The first blessing that the soul receives from the practice of the presence of God is that its faith is livelier and more active everywhere in our lives. This is particularly true in difficult times, since it obtains the grace we need to deal with temptation and to conduct ourselves in the world. The soul—accustomed by this

exercise to the practice of faith—can actually see and feel God by simply entering His presence. It invokes Him easily and obtains what it needs. In so doing, the soul could be said to approach the Blessed, in that it can almost say, 'I no longer believe, but I see and experience.' This faith becomes more and more penetrating as it develops through practice.”

Notes

TriCon's Small Group series are sponsored
by the Christian Education Committee

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