

“Loyalty”

I Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37; Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Matthew 5:21-26

[Jesus said to his followers,] ²¹“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ ²²But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.

²³So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

²⁵Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are on the way to court with him, or your accuser may hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you will be thrown into prison. ²⁶Truly I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny.”

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

¹⁵See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. ¹⁶If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess.

¹⁷But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, ¹⁸I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

¹⁹I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Introduction

Paul, who had founded the church in Corinth, is writing to them some time later, addressing a difficult, conflictive situation, part of which has to do with him. So he has said in this letter already,

“When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (I Corinthians 2:1-2).

I Corinthians 3:1-9

^{3:1}And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ²I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, ³for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? ⁴For when one says, “I belong to Paul,” and another, “I belong to Apollos,” are you not merely human?

⁵What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. ⁹For we are God’s servants, working together; you are God’s field, God’s building.

The Sermon

I invite you to take a moment, if you will, and think about people who have been good to you in your life. Helped you, raised you, did something for you, stood by you, cheered you up, made something good happen for you, taught you, intentionally brought you some joy or happiness, inspired you, guided you through a tough time.

As you flip through that mental rolodex, I invite you to linger on just one of those episodes, and then focus in on it for a minute: any moment or event or time in your life when someone voluntarily did something good for you.

Who was that person, and what did they do for you?

What do you think was their motivation?

In what way, however big or tiny, did that event change your life, even if just for a moment? Did you appreciate it at the time?

Did you appreciate that person at the time, and how so? Did you tell them how much you appreciated them?

And finally, where in this reflection do you see the idea of loyalty—

either to you, or to the other person;

or loyalty to humanity in general, or to an ideal;

or loyalty to some entity—

a country, a community, a political party, a friendship;

or loyalty, on your part or the other person's part, or both—to God?

We can silently give thanks for those events and those people right now.

The Bible has a lot to say about loyalty.

The loyalty of the covenant people to God and to each other is, thematically, the spine of the Ten Commandments.

In the long history of God's chosen people, Absalom's loyalty to his violated sister Tamar, and subsequent military disloyalty to his father David, is a typical tragic narrative—including David's loyalty to Absalom, which fails when troops loyal to David, against his express wishes, surround and kill Absalom on the battlefield.

The churches represented in the letters of the New Testament are filled with scenes—praises and complaints—having to do with loyalty and disloyalty.

God's constant and sometimes astonishing loyalty to an often unfaithful people—and to unfaithful people—shines through the Bible from the creation of *Adam* through the Exodus and Exile of the Chosen People; to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; to the apocalyptic glory of Revelation.

Through it all, the covenant remains astonishingly straightforward: "I will be your God, and you will be my people."

Loyalty.

The English word “loyal” goes back about 500 years or so; it’s from the Old French word for “legal.”ⁱ Which makes sense: To be *loyal* means I am *faithful to the people to whom I have an obligation to be faithful*.

It’s the nature of the *obligation* that helps me know whom it is that I am called to act in faithfulness.

The nature of the obligation gives me not only the meaning of loyalty, but also the limits of my various loyalties. I mean to be more loyal to God than to anything else—but the things to which we give the most energy tend to show us where our loyalties really are.

And when we place other loyalties above our loyalty to God, our words and our actions show that we have not fully embraced the invitation God has given us to embrace our full humanity or that of others. We hurt and neglect people, we poison God’s creation, we bow down and serve other gods.

In Deuteronomy, God gave the Covenant people two visions of how they could live their lives.

“I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.”

Those who obey God’s commandments by loving God, walking in God’s ways—love and justice, kindness, goodness, generosity, responsibility for each other—that is the way of Life, and they will live and be blessed.

But serve small-g “gods” who are not about the awesome love of the Creator God, and you will not find life there, and you will not live long in the land.

According to Matthew, Jesus said: You’ve heard it said, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are *angry* with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; if you *insult* a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; if you berate somebody and say, “You fool!” you’re already guilty.

You do not have to terminate the functioning of the animal organism that is a human being to begin killing them.

Loyalty to God demands loyalty to humanity. And loyalty to humanity demands loyalty to each other. We are in this together, regardless of who you are, or how you vote, or when and under what circumstances you got here.

The former Bishop of Pakistan, Mano Rimalshah, serves as a minister of the united and uniting church in Peshawar.ⁱⁱ Peshawar is in a border area between Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the Christian churches who are there minister to everyone who comes to them, including Taliban sympathizers.

Mano Rimalshah and his successor visited an Episcopal diocese in Texas a few years ago to report on the ministry. He said they couldn't consider themselves a church *for* the poor: there are too many. He said they're a church *of* the poor.ⁱⁱⁱ They offer medical care, pastoral care, and educational training to anyone who is in need. He said, "Anyone who walks through [our] door is a child of God. It's a costly love, a sacrificial love. It is a precious love."

He was asked once in an interview, "What breaks your heart apart, and what breaks it open?"^{iv}

He said, "The pain in my heart is when we use and abuse our relationship with the Divine so cruelly and artificially and negatively—using [God's] name, and yet hating and killing each other..."

"And of course what makes it glad is when I feel that we have embraced each other as faithful disciples."

After Paul had established the church in Corinth and then moved on to continue his missionary work all over the region, someone named Apollos emerged in Ephesus. Apollos was an Alexandrian—an eloquent man; knew the scriptures. He had been instructed in "the Way" (that's what Christianity was being called in those first decades after the crucifixion).

Luke, writing in Acts, said that Apollos "spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John." He helped a lot of people in the way he could fiercely debate opponents of Christianity.

It turned out that Apollos, by all accounts a decent guy, didn't have an understanding of the baptism in the name of Christ. He still understood it as a

phenomenon of John the Baptist—a baptism of repentance, but not of being bound to Christ by the Holy Spirit.

Apollos ended up being placed in the church in Corinth in Paul's absence, and when Paul heard that Apollos was leading the church, apparently without knowing anything about the Holy Spirit, things got dicey.

And it became kind of like when there's been a beloved minister in a church, and then that minister moves on and is succeeded by another, who may understand things a bit differently than the one who came before. And the one who was there before is still kind of "around," and when church people start hearing that the new guy is "doing it wrong," a lot of them are going to say, "Well, the old guy *taught* us wrong, or he didn't do what he *should* have done; he didn't tell us everything we needed to know."

And now people who were loyal to the first one are at odds with the people who are loyal to the second one, and all of a sudden there's the Paul faction and the Apollos faction, and now they're at each other's throats.

And, behold, the local congregation in Corinth: the exhibition of the kingdom of God. Good thing this kind of thing never happens in churches any more.

And Paul said to them, as long as there is this jealousy and quarreling among you, you're still not being spiritual people; you're just behaving according to human inclinations—in other words, it's like the Spirit has made no difference to you.

"When one of you says, 'I belong to Paul,' and another says, 'I belong to Apollos,' aren't you just a regular human, like anybody else who never even heard of Jesus?"

He said, "What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building."

Paul said, don't be loyal to me; don't be loyal to Apollos; be loyal to God and to each other.

I am reminded of an elderly Israeli man whose name was Ben, who had lost his beloved, precious, beautiful daughter in a Palestinian bombing of an Israeli checkpoint. And Ben pleaded with our group of American clergy travelers last April, saying, “Please don’t take this conflict home with you. Don’t be pro- Israel; don’t be pro-Palestine. Be pro-peace.”

This past week in New York City, passengers boarded a subway car and found that somebody had used a marker to draw swastikas and write the most appalling anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim filth all over the subway car.

To my knowledge, none of those passengers was Muslim or Jewish. But they were human. The strangers looked at the filth on the walls around them for a few seconds, and then one got out a tissue, and one got out some hand sanitizer, and they all started scrubbing, until the ugliness was gone.^v And they sat down and went their separate ways, knowing that they had all chosen to be loyal to humanity.

Some of you may remember that on his now legendary first broadcast after 9/11, David Letterman concluded a subdued monologue from behind his desk talking about a small town in northern Montana called Choteau. Montana was in the middle of a three-year drought, and the town of Choteau, population 1600, was an agricultural business community that had been hit hard. Letterman had made his mark on the world as the Michelangelo of a kind of humor that was so drenched in irony that it sometimes verged into cynicism. On that night after 9/11, Letterman could barely keep himself together as he announced that the draught-stricken small town of Choteau had held a rally in their high school gym specifically to raise money for New York City.

And the people of a rural outpost in northern Montana were loyal to people they would never meet in Manhattan.

I saw a story recently about a special needs high school student who had been made a manager for the basketball team. For the last home game of the season, the coach had decided to make the young man’s dream come true and put him in for the last minute of the game, no matter what the score was.

The clock wound down and with one minute to go, the coach sent the boy into the game to raucous cheers from the crowd. They had a play set up for him to try to give him a chance to score a point, adding him into the school’s permanent record of everyone who had ever played ball there. They ran the play a few times, and the

other team cooperated by not putting up any real defense, but it just wasn't happening.

So, with seconds left in the game, the other team had the ball, and all they had to do was inbound it and the clock would run out. But the player on the other team noticed that the player with special needs was still on the floor—right underneath the basket. Nobody had talked to him about the situation, but he had seen everything he needed to see. He called the special needs player's name to get his attention—this is the kid on the opposing team—passed him the ball right to him, and as time expired, the boy made the shot, and the crowd exploded in celebration.

Talk about knowing where your primary loyalty belongs.

We have loyalties to a lot of things—teams, hometowns, ideas, habits, corporations, political parties, beliefs about what's acceptable or who is acceptable.

According to Luke, when a lawyer asked Jesus whom he should call his neighbor, Jesus told him a story about a man who was traveling and fell into the hands of robbers, who left him half dead by the road. A priest came near but passed by on the other side. A Levite followed, and also passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, one of the people most aggrieved, most oppressed, most pointlessly despised by the others, came near, saw him, went to him, bandaged his wounds, put him on the Samaritan's own animal, brought him to an inn, gave his own money to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.'

And Jesus asked the lawyer, "Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?"

And I suppose I might just think of that in terms of, who was the most *loyal* to that man?

He said, "The one who showed him mercy."

And Jesus said, "Go and do likewise."

How will you show where your true loyalty lies today?

Keith Grogg
Montreat Presbyterian Church

Montreat, NC
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ⁱ According to dictionary.com, merriam-webster.com, and thefreedictionary.com.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.peshawardiocese.org/about.asp>;

<http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/the-ultimate-embrace>

ⁱⁱⁱ The Episcopal Diocese of Texas: <http://www.epicenter.org/article/pakistani-bishops-minister-in-hostile-land/>

^{iv} Short film *The Ultimate Embrace*, posted at

<http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/the-ultimate-embrace>.

^v <http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/05/us/subway-nazi-graffiti-new-york-trnd/index.html>