

**February 20, 2022**  
**Sermon Manuscript**

The Reason of Relationships (Lk 6, Gen 45, 1 Cor 15)

This morning I want to talk about human connections, and the new possibilities God provides for us to relate to others - to one another - in this broken and fallen world. **The good news is that Jesus wants to give us a capacity for relating to our fellow human beings that our natural birth didn't provide (us with), as well as a quality (and duration) of relationships that the world cannot offer.**

Today our province, the Anglican Church in North America, observes World Mission Sunday, as we prayed in our Collect for God to pour out his gift of the Holy Spirit to reach the ends of the earth with the gospel of salvation. Scripture tells all of us to "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."<sup>1</sup> So I wonder what reason(s) we would be inclined to offer to the unbelieving world?

Two weeks ago, I preached on some of the problems with the penal substitution theory<sup>2</sup> of what Jesus did on the cross, and I mentioned that Penal Substitution underlies what tends to be a primary way many Americans present the gospel to unbelievers, teaching that because of our sin God intends to punish us, but Jesus took that punishment upon himself.<sup>3</sup> But we *also* talked about how the penal substitution conception of the gospel can cause many who have experienced significant trauma in life to either fight, flee, or freeze - to not hear good news at all.<sup>4</sup> So, this means that whether or not *you personally* find Penal Substitution to be problematic, there is good reason to in-the-very-least reconsider its use for evangelism.<sup>5</sup> So, this morning I want to put forth *just one* very different answer (we can offer) to others as to why they should join us in following Christ. And that is that he provides us with **a capacity for relating to our fellow human beings that our natural birth didn't provide (us with), as well as a quality (and duration) of relationships that the world cannot offer.**

This morning our Gospel passage from Luke 6 was an excerpt from what is often called the Sermon on the Plain,<sup>6</sup> where Jesus is calling his followers to a different way of relating to others, that goes beyond our natural tendencies. He teaches, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, <sup>28</sup> bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you," turn the other cheek, and so on.

<sup>1</sup> 1 Peter 3 - "15 But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, 16 keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander."

<sup>2</sup> Reminder: "Penal Substitution contends that God is holy and that humans are sinful. And because God is holy, he must be true to his own holiness and can't simply ignore human sin. So there must be a just punishment (hence, penal (penalty)). But Jesus Christ, the God-Man, stood in the sinner's place, absorbing God's just punishment on sinners (hence, substitution) - with a special emphasis on his not just dying for us, but his suffering." [Hydinger, Sandage, Jankowski, and Rambo, "Penal Substitutionary Atonement and Concern for Suffering: An Empirical Study", *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, March 2017, Vol 45, No 1, 33.]

<sup>3</sup> See that full sermon here: [www.saintmatthiasoakdale.com/leave-penal-sub-behind](http://www.saintmatthiasoakdale.com/leave-penal-sub-behind)

<sup>4</sup> On 7/1/18 I preached a sermon that explained some statistics related to the ACES inventory (Adverse Childhood Experiences survey), which asks these kids to identify the forms of adversity they have experienced from a list of ten. The first five are have you experienced physical abuse, sexual abuse, verbal abuse, physical neglect, and emotional neglect? Then, the second five are did you have a parent who was addicted to alcohol or drugs, a parent diagnosed with mental illness, did you witness your mother being abused, did you lose a parent due to abandonment or divorce, or do you have a family member in jail? 47.9% of children in the U.S. have experienced at least one of these. One in three experienced it under the age of six. And even in higher income families, more than one in four have ACEs. But more than one fifth of children have experienced two or more!

<sup>5</sup> Brian Zahnd notes: "It's very eye opening to realize that in all the evangelistic sermons found in the book of Acts, none of them makes an appeal to afterlife issues. Not one. If preaching the gospel is telling people how to avoid an afterlife hell, the apostles in Acts did not preach the gospel! Peter and Paul were not preaching a gospel of "how to go to heaven and not hell when you die. Their gospel was the audacious announcement that the world has a new Lord, a new King, a new emperor: the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth. Their invitation was to believe this joyful announcement, turn from the destructive ways of sin, and be baptized into the new world where Jesus is Lord." ( <https://brianzahnd.com/2018/11/hell-and-how-to-get-there/#more-6535> )

<sup>6</sup> In contrast to the Gospel of Matthew's 'Sermon on the Mount'

But Jesus also acknowledges that this way of relating to others is *far beyond* our inborn capacities for love and certainly different from the way the world tends to relate to one another, which is to only love those who love us first. He says in verse 32,

*“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. <sup>33</sup> And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. <sup>34</sup> And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full. <sup>35</sup> But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. <sup>36</sup> Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.”*

So Jesus is calling us to relate to our fellow humans in a manner that is only possible with God’s help. The fruit of human sin is always to alienate us from one another, but Jesus is teaching how he wants to help us overcome that alienation through practicing love and forgiveness [& mercy], even toward those who hurt us. And he’s saying that relationship with him and being loved unconditionally by God should enable us to do this, to treat others differently than the rest of the world.

So it makes sense that our lectionary paired *with* this the Old Testament story of Joseph forgiving his brothers, from Genesis 45. Many of you probably recall that years before, Joseph’s brothers had treated him terribly. Jealous that he was their father’s favorite, they had sold Joseph as a slave to some Ishmaelites traveling through to Egypt,<sup>7</sup> which changed Joseph’s life forever. However, the Lord had never left Joseph and been faithful to love and care for him. And in time Joseph had risen all the way to becoming Egypt’s second in command. Indeed, in God’s providence he used Joseph’s wisdom and position to preserve enough food in Egypt to have ample provisions during a seven-year famine, not just for them, but for the surrounding nations: including Joseph’s brothers. That was the occasion for Joseph ever meeting his brothers again: they had come to Egypt for food. But in our (dramatic) passage today, this ruler of Egypt reveals that the brother they assumed was dead - at their hands - was not just alive, but was *him*. The love Joseph has received from God had clearly enabled him to forgive his brothers for wronging him in a way that most human beings would consider unforgivable.

However, what we see in this story is not just forgiveness, but what forgiveness *can* lead to, though it may not - which is full reconciliation. It is always important when we talk about forgiveness, that we make a distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation. When we forgive someone, we give up the right<sup>8</sup> to punish them for the harm they’ve done to us; but that does not mean things go back to normal. For example, if someone’s spouse abuses them, do they need to get to the place of forgiving their abuser? Absolutely. But they dishonor themselves and their spouse if they go right back to living with the person - to how things were - and pretend it never happened; that’s not what forgiveness means.

What’s unique about the story of Joseph - and frankly different from many of the situations we’ll probably find ourselves in - is that the power-dynamic between Joseph & his brothers has drastically changed since they sold him into slavery. With Joseph now second in command only to pharaoh, and probably having his own security detail, there was *no risk* of his brothers doing again what they had done before. There were natural boundaries protecting Joseph from being harmed again. But when we forgive, this only provides the *opportunity* for reconciliation; forgiveness should bring with it boundaries that prevent repeated harm or abuse and provide the opportunity for trust to be re-earned.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 37

<sup>8</sup> Real or perceived

And the sad reality is that trust *is not* always re-earned. Many abusers never change, and unless they do, they should never be entitled to have the same access to us that they enjoyed before. But this is one reason the Church is such a gift to us. In the Church, God has given us a new family - spiritual brothers and sisters, parents and children - who (at least in theory) subscribe to this code of conduct. And this is especially a gift for those who have left family behind or don't enjoy the same level of relationship, because healthy boundaries necessitated it. Indeed, developing deep relationships with fellow believers who are not blood relatives is the very thing that can free us up to put in healthy boundaries with blood relatives or lifelong acquaintances. [We can only risk losing their love, which is a risk with any boundary we put in, if we have cultivated other relationships where we are also deeply known and loved.]

I wonder who here is grateful for godly friendships and relationships? Aren't they wonderful? Aren't they a blessing? [[Some of us have been able to cultivate them more than others]]

**The good news is that Jesus wants to give us a capacity for relating to our fellow human beings that our natural birth didn't provide (us with), as well as a quality (and duration) of relationships that the world cannot offer.**

You know, one of the wonderful things about social media is that it allows us the possibility to remain connected - at least to some extent - with friends and loved ones who may live far away. This is especially valuable in an age where people move around like never before in history. But for many of us who have loved ones scattered far and wide, we still miss being able to hug them, and being able to be physically in their presence, to hang out. And yet, the promise of resurrection and an eternal existence for the saints in Christ guarantees us just that!

Jesus not only provides us with the possibility for a *quality* of relationships that the world cannot provide - an eternal quality - but also a duration of these relationships that is eternal. And this takes me to the passage we read from 1 Corinthians on our future resurrection (where we'll finish this morning). I'm wondering if the first verse we read from it - verse 29 - got anyone's attention? Paul is responding to some in the Corinthian Church who were apparently teaching there was no resurrection of the dead awaiting us. And he writes, "<sup>29</sup> Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them?" This verse has puzzled many - and been cause for much debate - in the Church over the centuries.<sup>9</sup> What is Paul talking about here? I mean, the Mormons are known for their strange practice of baptism for the dead, but that is not a practice in orthodox Christianity. Well, the best explanation as to the meaning of what Paul's talking about [from both ancient and recent scholars] is that there were people who would come into the faith and get baptized after the loved one died, because of the promise of resurrection: because Christianity teaches that all who are in Christ will be raised from the dead and will be able to continue in a bodily relationship with one another for eternity. In other words, for some *this* promise of an eternal duration to the earthly relationships between fellow believers was the main thrust - the most attractive element of the good news - that put them over the top to turn from being dead in their sins to new life in Christ!

Now, today this feature of the good news has been largely lost in the Western world [particularly for evangelism]. Instead, the dominant belief in our society that everyone goes to heaven when they die or at least everyone other than Hitler or Bin Laden or Ted Bundy. Most people in the West believe that everyone goes to heaven for eternity *regardless of their connection to Jesus*, despite there being little support for this in scripture.<sup>10</sup> Well, I would suggest that one of the primary reasons people believe this is because presentations of the gospel based in penal substitution present a picture of God as primarily a

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Bailey reports there are as many as 40 different interpretations of this verse.

<sup>10</sup> Not to mention that scripture does not teach that a disembodied afterlife faces us eternity, but that those who are in Christ we will be resurrected to an embodied existence for eternity beyond the Final Judgment.

punisher, which many intuit does not seem right. And so they've swung in the other direction to define God's love as universal salvation for all.

However, scripture teaches that no one gets to enjoy eternity with God apart from Jesus. But some (particularly in the Eastern Church) maintain that this is not so much because God will send a punishment of eternal hellfire on unbelievers, as that those who have lived apart from God in their lives will have been so deformed by sin and addicted to evil that they will experience the love of God in eternity as torment.<sup>11</sup> Nagasawa explains hell as "a state of being in which the love of God becomes torment."<sup>12</sup> And might people who didn't get a fair shake at knowing Jesus in their earthly lives get a chance to choose him in eternity? Perhaps. "But those who have cultivated an opposition to him will experience him as torment, as if he were an alcohol addiction counselor and they had become absolutely addicted to alcohol and totally resistant to giving it up."<sup>13</sup> C.S. Lewis depicted something similar to this in his short book *The Great Divorce*.

How differently might unbelievers respond to our conversations about the gospel if they didn't already assume that most everyone is destined for heaven, not because God is a punishing God, but because God honors our free will to choose him or not?

One answer we might offer to others as to why they should join us in following Christ, is that he provides us with **a capacity for relating to our fellow human beings that our natural birth didn't provide (us with), as well as a quality (and duration) of relationships that the world cannot offer.**

But just when we might think that good news couldn't get any better, a final thing to remember is that we not only have the promise of risen, bodily fellowship with other believers. We are promised the best version of them and to be the best version of us, not only in regard to physical ableness, but in terms of character. This is what Paul is talking about as he continues to teach about the resurrection in the rest of the passage.

In the paragraph of verses 35 to 41, Paul is talking about all of us have mortal body that is subject to death, but at the resurrection we will be given a heavenly body. And while much about that body remains a mystery, we know it will not be subject to illness or death.<sup>14</sup>

Then, in the rest of the passage, Paul writes about how our characters will be changed to fully become like that of Jesus. In verse 48 he writes,

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<sup>11</sup> Mako Nagasawa explains, "In eternity, those who have cultivated an anger with the corruption of sin and the larger desire towards which it opens – a desire for Jesus himself – will experience him with joy. I for one believe that people who did not have the chance to know Jesus during this lifetime, and people who only had terrible Christian witnesses, might reveal this about themselves. **[NOTE: I UNFORTUNATELY FAILED TO INCLUDE THIS LAST SENTENCE IN THE FOOTNOTE OF THE FEB6 SERMON ON HOW NAGASAWA EXPLAINS THOSE, EVEN THE ENEMIES OF ISRAEL, WHO DIED IN THE OLD TESTAMENT PERIOD.]** But those who have cultivated an opposition to him will experience him as torment, as if he were an alcohol addiction counselor and they had become absolutely addicted to alcohol and totally resistant to giving it up. As the early Christians understood it, and as the Eastern Orthodox maintain, hell is a state of being in which the love of God becomes torment.[11] People who reject Jesus embrace some sin of their own, which has so deformed their sense of love and selfhood that they make it their identity.

<sup>12</sup> Some may insist that Jesus accept them and accommodate them, like those who say, "Lord, Lord, did we not do miracles in your name?" (Matthew 7:22; 25:11) without embracing the internal transformation Jesus taught (Matthew 5:1 – 7:28) for which the Holy Spirit offers himself as fuel like oil for lamps (Matthew 25:1 – 13). But Jesus will deny their claim and instead call them to repent, that is, to become his partners in his anger against the distortion of love and self they have brought about within themselves. That endless call to repent will be painful, just like it is painful for addicts to be denied the evil to which they have become addicted. And it will be Jesus' ongoing call to repent which drives the sin-addicted further away and further into frustration and anger.

<sup>13</sup> Others of a more minority position called conditional immortality question whether anyone apart from Jesus will have an eternal existence beyond judgment at all, since the final chapter of Revelation describes the tree of life from the Garden of Eden as only being made available to those who are in Christ (see Rev. 22, esp v 14).

<sup>14</sup> **For a much deeper exploration of this, I recommend the chapter "Hell and How To Get There" from Brian Zahnd's book *Sinners in the Hands of a Loving God*, available to read for free here:** <https://brianzahnd.com/2018/11/hell-and-how-to-get-there/#more-6535>

<sup>15</sup> See Paul later writes (beyond our passage) in 1 Cor 15: "51 Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. 53 For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.

*“<sup>48</sup> As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven. <sup>49</sup> And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.*

So this morning we've thought about one very different answer (we can offer) to others as to why they should join us in following Christ, is that he provides us with **a capacity for relating to our fellow human beings that our natural birth didn't provide (us with), as well as a quality (and duration) of relationships that the world cannot offer.** But in order to provide this reason - *of relationships* - as a reason for our hope, this is a possibility we must first begin receiving ourselves.

- Just because Jesus has invited us into the way of forgiveness, doesn't mean we have followed him into it. No, there are many Christians whose dealings with others are no different from the sinners of the world. So perhaps today we can ask Jesus continue to help us receive his grace toward us, so we might begin practicing treating others accordingly.
- Or just because the Lord has offered us a new spiritual family, and the possibility of friendships with fellow believers based on the way of Christ, doesn't mean we have made efforts to cultivate those relationships. And indeed, such a lack of godly relationships is sure to keep us in dysfunctional relationships and failing to put in boundaries in the relationships we do have (because the risk of losing their love is too great). So maybe today God wants you to begin asking him to show you how to begin or continue cultivating relationships of depth and vulnerability (an accountability) with some fellow believers.
- Or perhaps today is an opportunity to celebrate and give thanks to God for the wonderful blessings of godly relationships He has bestowed! And that the promise we will be resurrected and all made fully into the likeness of Jesus, means that the best is yet to come!

Will you pray with me?

**God, thank you for inviting us into a way of relating to others that our natural birth didn't provide us with. And we thank you for the promise of a resurrected eternity as our best selves and getting to be together with so many whom we love: the communion of saints.**

**In closing, we take a moment to ponder how you have moved on our hearts to respond.**

**And we bring it before you. And if there is anything you're calling us to do, we ask for your grace to follow through.**

**Amen.**