

Transformed by Relationships: With Christ & His Community

What happens when the teacher says: "Now listen. This is the most important thing you will learn in this course"? You know what happens. The whole class perks up, picks up pens, quits texting and checking email, stops doodling and daydreaming. Whatever is said next is certainly going to show up on a test.

Pay attention to the drama of the scene that unfolds in Matthew 22:34-40.

- A man steps forward to question Jesus about the Jewish Law.
- The Law is believed to be the revelation of the one True God.
- The man who raises the question is described as a "lawyer," "an expert in the Jewish law," a professional theologian.
 - He is one of those who have analyzed, scoured, memorized, and debated the meaning of the law for years.
 - 613 commandments: 248 positive, 365 negative
- The question he raised is one that Jewish scholars like himself had often debated: "What is the greatest commandment in the Law?" His question is meant to "test" Jesus (only the devil and the Pharisees are subjects of this verb in Matthew). If you were to prioritize them, where would you start? Is such an exercise even possible? Are all of them of equal weight?
- And he is asking this question of Jesus, the greatest Teacher who ever lived, and who himself is the very revelation of God.
- So, an expert in the law, the greatest revelation of God available, is asking the greatest teacher who ever lived, what is to be regarded as the greatest commandment in all of the Law.
- Now, whatever he says next is going to be extremely important.
- Jesus doesn't blink. He doesn't scribble in the dirt or shuffle his feet or scratch his head. He turns and looks the lawyer in the eyes and says what he knows from the depths of his soul:
 - **Matthew 22:37-38** "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. ¹

- Jesus simply affirms the legitimacy of the question and offers his answer. But before anyone could challenge that or affirm it, he moved on:
 - ³⁹And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'
- Then he offered an important summary: **Matthew 22:40** All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Disciples scrambled to get that down. This was almost certainly going to be on the test.

Jesus' response is one of the most powerful examples of simplicity you can imagine. He pours 613 commandments into a beaker, turns up the fire of revelation, and boils them down to their essence. Only two remain.

He walks to the board where the lawyer has written the most complicated of equations and begins to simplify terms until only two irreducible terms remain.

He takes the complexity of all the written commandments, of all the theological debate about their meaning and application, all the teachings of religion and spirituality, and simplifies them to this essential summary, four words, really – Love God, Love People.

If these two commandments from the great revelation of God in the Law are indeed at the top of the list, according to the greatest teacher who ever lived, then we would do well to pay close attention to what they mean for our lives.

WHAT MAKES THESE THE GREATEST COMMANDMENTS?

- **These two commandments express the very essence of God's purposes in the world.** This is the explanation for creation, history, providence, and redemption. God's great project on planet earth is intended to accomplish one great end: He wants a people, made in his image, who love him whole-heartedly and who love each other unselfishly. This is church. This is the kingdom of God. This is what eternity looks like.
 - Jesus says the Law and the Prophets "hang" on them.
 - Two tables of the Law:
 - 1st four commandments: love God (1st 3, if you are Roman Catholic or Lutheran)
 - 2nd six commandments: love people (2nd 7 for Roman Catholics and Lutherans)
 - The Cross itself as a symbol of the life we are called to live expresses this as well. It has two dimensions:

- Vertically – we are called to a life of loving God
- Horizontally – we are called to a life of loving people.
- Jesus often taught that if the relationship with one is damaged, they both are

These two commandments express the very essence of the purpose of God on this planet. That's one reason they are so important. But there is another.

- **These are the only commandments based on a relationship rather than on legalistic demands.** These commands change the nature of all the others. The entire revelation of the Law and the Prophets “hangs” on them, depends on them, derives their meaning from them.

We are not called to obey laws. We are called to obey a person, to love a person.

- **Luke 11:42** "Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect **justice** and the **love of God**. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone.

In the same way, the ethical dimension of our life is not about rule-keeping. It is about living responsibly in relationship with other human beings. These commandments focus on the heart, the motive, the person that we are.

- **These commandments affect all of life.**
 - The commandment is meant to be **inclusive** Nothing of the personal life is left out (heart, soul, mind, strength). All of our life is to be directed Godward in love.
 - But none of our relationships is left out either. We are to love our neighbor. That clearly includes those near us, those like us, those we know. But as you are aware, Jesus had much more in mind when he cited **Leviticus 19:18**.

Another lawyer raising this same question in **Luke 10:25-37**, earns a more lengthy response from Jesus – the parable of the good Samaritan.

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

"What is written in the Law?" he replied. "How do you read it?"

He answered: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind'; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"

"You have answered correctly," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?"

Jesus spoke the parable of the Good Samaritan to define the word "neighbor" in a way that transforms all our prejudices and cultural commitments. Our neighbor is anyone we can serve, regardless of their race, their nationality, their beliefs, or the way they are living their lives.

In case we still have an asterisk and a footnote beside the word "neighbor" to exclude someone we just don't want to be responsible for loving, Jesus is even more specific. In the Sermon on the Mount he offers this:

Matthew 5:43-47 "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?"

The commands to love God and love people are the greatest ones because they are essentially different than all the others, underlie all the others, and give meaning to them.

- **There is at least one other really good reason to regard these as the greatest of the commandments – these are the commandments that transform us.**

These are the ones that, as we attend to them, meditate on them, struggle with them, and make an effort to obey them, transform us. They change us from the inside out. They shape us into the reflection of God's life and character that we were designed for.

After his words in the Sermon on the Mount regarding love of enemy that reflects God's unconditional love, he adds, in **Matthew 5:48**: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

This is where I would like to spend time today and tomorrow – thinking more clearly about how it is that the relationships we are part of transform us.

By "us" I could mean we who are Christians, we who follow Christ. But I want to be more specific in this context. I mean, "we who serve Christ in vocational ministry." We who tend to the flock of God, who seek the least and the lost, who put ourselves in the path of human hurts and hopes on a regular basis as part of our calling. We chaplains. We pastors. We priests. We missionaries. We are transformed by obedience to the Great Commandments in the contexts of our relationships with Christ and his community. We are transformed in the contexts of our relationships with Christ and his mission.

By "his community" I clearly mean his church, the people of God, both the larger body of Christ and the particular expression of that body in local congregations of which we are part. But I mean something more specific in this context. I mean our fellow servants of Christ, our fellow pastors, fellow chaplains, fellow missionaries, fellow priests. This is a community too often ignored and neglected in the course of our work. But this is a community of relationships with the force to deeply impact the shape of our lives, helping form us in the image of Christ. I'll spend most of our time this morning focused on our relationships with Christ's community.

By "his mission" I mean our engagement with Christ in following him into the brokenness and lostness of the world. Our relationship with those he loves unconditionally changes us as well. The church is modified, transformed, in the pursuit of our mission. We change as we follow him into the world, on board sailing vessels, into conversations with the least, the lost, and the lonely. When we do it well, we emerge from those acts of mission slightly modified, a bit more like the one we follow. Tomorrow, I want to think more about this.

Relationships are our Destiny

We are formed for relationship. Created in the image of God (Gen 1:26), we are made "male and female." As often noted, the only time the Creator pronounced something "not good" in his creation project, it was the lack of relationship: "it is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen 2:18).

Last Sunday was Trinity Sunday, according to the Revised Common Lectionary. We who are created in God's image worshipped and pondered the mystery of God as Father, Son, and Spirit, the God who does not simply love, but who is love. Stephen Seamands, professor of Christian doctrine at Asbury Theological Seminary maintains that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity "reveals that persons are *essentially* relational."²

Our amazing brain, besides being designed to handle reason, art, music, and mathematics, is also specifically structured for language, emotion, and relationships. We are created for

relationships. The price we pay for ignoring this reality is called loneliness, and it is epidemic in our culture, not only among those we serve, but among the servants of God as well. More on this later. For now, simply note, relationships are not peripheral to our existence. We were made for this.

Relationships are Formative

Just as relationships are not optional for the human being, neither is their impact upon our lives. Dallas Willard notes that spiritual formation is a given human experience. We are all spiritually formed. He writes:

“Spiritual formation, without regard to any specifically religious context or tradition, is the process by which the human spirit or will is given a definite ‘form’ or ‘character.’ It is a process that happens to everyone. The most despicable as well as the most admirable of persons have had a spiritual formation. Terrorists as well as saints are the outcome of spiritual formation. Their spirits or hearts have been formed. Period.”³

For good or ill, where does this formation occur? Primarily in the context of relationships. We are conceived in a relationship. We are born into a web of existing relationships. We are nurtured (or not) in this network of family, friends, and institutions within which we live and move and have our being. We are shaped and formed by mothers and father, brothers and sisters, previous generations and the present one, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, teachers, coaches, pastors, priests, people in church, people at work, authors, strangers, enemies, television personalities . . . the list goes on and on. We are spiritually formed in the context of our relationships.

These many relationships are not isolated and individual. They form an interlocking relationship system of which we are each a contributing part, from the moment we arrive. These systems exert a profound effect upon our lives, our thinking, our values, our beliefs, as well as upon our physical and emotional functioning. This is the fire in which we are forged.

Relationships May Be Transformative

Frodo was required to take the one ring of power back to Mordor, to the Cracks of Doom in the depths of Orodruin, the Fire Mountain, where it was forged, in order to destroy it. In the same way, if we desire personal transformation, we must return to the fires that produced us. Our relationships have had their part to play in shaping us, and they can be entered into in such a way as to reshape us as well. Character formed in the context of relationships is transformed there as well.

This is where the Great Commandments come in. Jesus teaches us that all the law and the prophets, all the revelation and purposes of God, hang on this issue – that we learn what it is to love God wholeheartedly and that we learn to love people unselfishly. This is transformation, and it occurs in relationship.

I have three stops I would like to make on my excursion through this topic.

- First, I want to visit several portions of Scripture that point to the role of the people of God in the process of personal transformation, or spiritual renovation.
- Second, I would like to visit some of the particular experiences of my own life and ministry in which these relationships have played a significant role.
- Finally, I would like to pause to consider some of the particular ways in which your own role as maritime ministers comes into view.

The People of God as Agents of Mutual Transformation

The Great Commandment offers its two-pronged thrust into our lives, teaching us to love God and to love people. The choice to heed that instruction as a way of life is the decision to move toward transformation.

Ruth, the woman from Moab, expressed so clearly the fundamental issue every human being has to face when it comes to the shape our lives take spiritually: Who will my God be? Who will my people be? When Naomi announces her intent to return to Judah, leaving Ruth and Orpah, her daughters-in-law, behind in Moab, Ruth takes a stand:

Ruth 1:16-17 "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me."

Ruth determined that Yahweh would be her God and that his people would become the community in which she invested her life. Her decision was not so much about where she would live her life – Israel or Moab – as it was about the network of relationships that would henceforth shape her life. Yahweh, not Chemosh, would be her God. The Israelites, not the Moabites, would be her people. Her deliberate decision aligned her life with the purposes of God in history, whether she realized it or not. Her contribution would not be known for three generations, but she would be remembered throughout Christian history, her name enshrined in the genealogy of Jesus himself (Matt 1:5).

Aligning our lives with the people of God may be the most potentially transforming decision we ever make. I often say to people that when moving into a new community, the most serious factor they ought to weigh is not about the schools for their children, the location of shopping malls or recreational facilities, or the proximity to the workplace. The weightiest issue ought to be, where will I find an expression of church, the people of God, here with whom to join my life?

We have answered the question "Who will be my God?" better than we have responded to the question, "Who will be my people?"

Jesus and Community

Jesus never had only one disciple. From the beginning he called them into community. He sent them on mission in pairs, not alone. His final words to them included significant words about community:

John 13:34-35 "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

John 17:20-23 "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

It would be in community that Jesus disciples would learn to love, to share, to give, to support, to pray, to encourage, and to grow. The Lord's Prayer is plural, addressed to "*our* Father," asking him to "give *us* this day *our* daily bread," to "forgive *us* our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against *us*," to "lead *us* not into temptation," but to "deliver *us* from evil." Community is the place Jesus envisioned transformation to occur.

Community in the Early Church

Although the word "love" does not occur in the book of Acts, either as a verb or as a noun, it is replaced by the beautiful Greek word *koinonia*, fellowship, sharing things in common, community. The story is of a community of servants of Christ, filled with his Spirit, engaging his mission, and sharing life with each other. Even their conflicts are opportunities to understand better the life to which they have committed themselves. James' words after the heated debate over the inclusion of Gentiles in the community on the basis of faith alone are significant: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to *us*" (Acts 15:28).

The New Testament epistles reflect this same kind of concern for Christian community as the place where transformation takes place. More than a hundred "one another commandments" in the Scripture assume that we would be living in close community. "Encourage one another," "exhort one another," "pray for one another." My favorite is "forgive one another." Do you see the implications of that? You can only forgive someone who has been close enough to you to wound you.

I have often told my congregation that it means I need regularly to offend several of them so that they will have the opportunity to be obedient to the commandment. That is only partly in jest. It is in the rough edges of relationships that we grow. We do not learn to love entirely by being around loveable people. People who love deeply may, by their example, inspire and teach us what love means. But irritable, cantankerous, selfish people are the

ones who call it out of us. It is the wounded by the way that give the Samaritan the opportunity to do good. It is the enemy who gives us the chance to obey Jesus' words. It is the one who wounds us that teaches us to forgive. The kind of spiritual formation offered in the New Testament assumes Christian community of the earthiest sort.

1 Corinthians 13 describes the life of Christian love in more detail than we find anywhere else in Scripture. It is one of the biblical passages I point to as an excellent portrayal of what living a spiritually and emotionally mature, well-differentiated life looks like. It paints love as more than a warm feeling. It is the deliberately chosen behavior of a follower of Christ living in community. It resides in the character of the lover, not in the response of the beloved. Love is patient (implying stressful circumstances and annoying people), love is kind (implying people in need), love keeps no record of wrongs (implying wounds and wrongs). You get the idea.

1 Corinthians 13 lies, significantly, between chapters 12 and 14 – those passages describing some of the worst behavior of the Corinthian church, which is saying something. But living for Christ in Corinth was a challenge. One of my teachers described Corinth as a wicked seaport town, like Houston. Yet right there, in the midst of their spiritual pride and their division over spiritual gifts, Paul calls them to community. He teaches about being the body of Christ. And he tells them of a way of living that is far superior to speaking in either human or angelic tongues.

The point is, we don't learn this life of maturity in a cloister. We don't learn it in the solitude of a desert cave. We learn it in a community where sinners surround us. And we do our share of helping them learn it as well.

In Houston, churches are nearly as plentiful as banks. (Once they were far more numerous than banks, but the banks are proliferating faster than churches.) We can easily come to take the privilege of Christian community for granted. You, better than most folks, know what it is to minister to brothers and sisters in Christ who lack the privilege and opportunity of living in Christian community. Chaplains in many fields face that same reality. Christian seafarers, prisoners, people confined to beds in hospitals and nursing homes, and soldiers far from home all share this in common – Christian community is a scarce commodity and deeply missed. The opportunity to talk with another believer, to share the body and blood of Christ, to read Scripture together or to pray, is a rare and precious gift for these.

On the other extreme are those of us for whom the opportunity for such fellowship is available in our homes, our churches, our friendships, and our workplace, and yet we manage to take it for granted, ignoring the resource it offers for our lives in Christ. In *Life Together* Dietrich Bonhoeffer warns us: "It is not simply to be taken for granted that the Christian has the privilege of living among other Christians."⁴

He writes:

It is true, of course, that what is an unspeakable gift of God for the lonely individual is easily disregarded and trodden under foot by those who have the gift every day. It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us, that the time that still separates us from utter loneliness may be brief indeed. Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace, that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.⁵

Although I cannot speak for chaplains of any sort, I can tell you that pastors can be among the worst offenders when it comes to the experience of Christian community. You all are probably better than us. We can live and serve Christ in the same neighborhood, passing one another's church buildings on the way to our own, and yet fail to find an hour a month to pray together. We manage to know each other's names (perhaps) but not our needs. We can exchange a hundred emails a week with people, but not check in on each other. My fellow pastors and I have recently talked about this as we got together to plan a community event for the National Day of Prayer. We actually like each other and respect each other. But life returns to normal and we ignore each other.

I suspect that were we on a mission field, where Christian community is at a premium, we might overcome our lazy indifference and make time for each other. At our worst we see each other as competitors. But in our busyness, to simply ignore other servants of Christ who are engaging the same mission field, working for the same King, serving the same kingdom, is not an improvement over competitiveness.

Yet one of the most frequently offered complaints of those in vocational ministry is our prevailing sense of loneliness and isolation. Those whom we serve do not really know us. They may assume that they do because they listen to our sermons or read our writings. But we do not feel known. Those of you whose parishioners appear in port for a single conversation and then sail away to other corners of the earth, are certainly not known by them. You may have offered them Christ, offered them hope, shared a prayer, broken bread, or given them a ride to Wal-Mart. God used that moment of ministry in their life. But they do not know you.

Pastors need other pastors. Chaplains need other chaplains. Those whose vocation places us in ministry need the fellowship and friendship of others who are following that call. We need the conversations, the prayers, the understanding that comes from others who do what we do. We are transformed by that kind of community. The failure to avail ourselves of these conversations and prayers only leaves us in our isolated, lonely, and untransformed state.

Christian Community and My Own Journey

The opportunity to think with you all about the ways in which relationships serve as the place of transformation for us, has given me the chance to think through the ways in which that has been true for me over twenty-five years as a pastor and seven more as a teacher. I'm in the process of making that change once more, and so this assignment has caught me in a sort of reflective mood. I have thought about ways in which God has used Christian community to transform and sustain my life in Christ.

Lest this become a kind of narcissistic exercise, I have taken encouragement from the words of Carl Rogers:

I have found that the very feeling which has seemed to me most private, most personal and hence most incomprehensible by others, has turned out to be an expression for which there is a resonance in many other people. It has led me to believe that what is most personal and unique in each of us is probably the very element which would, if it were shared or expressed, speak most deeply to others. This has helped me to understand artists and poets who have dared to express the unique in themselves.⁶

So, in this brief reflection on the way that Christian community has worked in my transformation to this point, I invite you to reflect on your own.

It was in the Christian community of a local congregation, Glenn Rose Baptist Church, located on Interstate 45 north of downtown Houston, that I was welcomed into the world. My mother saw to it that I was present for instruction and worship from the time I was an infant (in utero, actually). There I came to know of God and God's love. There I heard the gospel and responded to it as a teen-ager. There I sought counsel of my pastor, Leroy Pearson as I attempted to discern God's direction in my life. My pastor had spoken words over me at my baptism that continued to ring in my ears, a sense that God had something he planned for me to do with my life in ministry. It was there I was afforded my first opportunities to exercise gifts of preaching, teaching, and leading, even as a high school and college student. Kind people prayed for me and affirmed me in my sense of call in to ministry. A caring pastor and some spiritually mature adults offered models that still provide me with guidance.

I read once that every one should have in their lives a Paul (a mentor), a Barnabas (a peer), and a Timothy (a protégé). My life has been blessed and shaped by all these. Professors at Houston Baptist University took me under their wings – Glen Cain, Al Collins, Arthur Travis, A.E. Kannwischer. Later some of these mentors later became my colleagues as I was invited back to teach on the faculty. At Southwestern Theological Seminary, professors such as William Hendricks and Jack MacGorman provided role models of warm piety and passionate scholarship. Then in the religion graduate school at Baylor University, Ray Summers, Wally Christian, Dan McGee, and Jack Flanders filled that role.

When I returned to Houston Baptist University to teach, some of my old mentors were still there. I shared an office with a peer, Keith Putt, now a philosophy professor on the faculty at Samford University in Birmingham. We shared more than an office. We shared a passion for Scripture, for reading, for learning, and for teaching. I think I learned more from my colleague in his early 30s at the time than from many classes I had taken. And as for protégés, that was no problem. Bright, enthusiastic students were part of every class I taught, and many of those relationships have endured more than two decades.

That was all quite simple as long as life was divided into semesters and I was in an academic institution. But twenty-two years ago I accepted the call of the University Baptist Church in Clear Lake to serve as her pastor. Where now was Paul? Who now would be Barnabas? Where would Timothy be?

Filling those relationships became something I had to work at. And to tell you the truth, I quickly became busy with the roles of pastor and husband and the father of two young boys. I neglected developing the kind of community I needed for my own spiritual and emotional well-being. In the mid-1990s that changed.

In August of 1994 a series of life-quakes hit and I felt like I was at ground zero. One of our associate pastors on our staff, a dear friend, was discovered to be in an adulterous affair. He resigned, became suicidal, and was hospitalized. In October my seventh grade son was caught using marijuana and was expelled from school. A similar incident with my older son was narrowly averted in early November. On November 11 my seventy-six year old dad, who suffered from emphysema due to a lifetime of smoking, went into the hospital for what would be the last time. He died on Christmas Eve and, since he had no pastor, I officiated at his funeral, on December 26, my forty-second birthday. A month later our church embarked on the rigors of a \$3.5 million building campaign – my first. Before 1995 was done my mother had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. She was hospitalized from Thanksgiving weekend until mid-January of 1996, when she moved to our home under hospice care and died a few weeks later.

Along the way, I became deeply depressed. Many people in our congregation cared about what their pastor was facing. My wife and family cared. But all these needed me to be healthy and whole for them. Few if any understood. They could not have grasped what it was like to be standing in the shower, an hour before services were to begin every Sunday, weeping because I felt I had nothing to say. And then, nevertheless, stepping into the pulpit and preaching week after week. How could they understand that? And having no one I believed understood only made the loneliness and depression deeper.

During those months I was first exposed to the writing of Eugene Peterson. I read *The Contemplative Pastor* and I resonated with what I heard. He said, I recall, that pastors have only three central tasks: Prayer, Preaching, and Spiritual Direction. Prayer, I was familiar with. Preaching, I understood. But nothing in my own spiritual formation had made me familiar with what spiritual direction was about. I seriously did not know what the term meant. But Peterson helped me grasp it. I realized that I had been involved in that process

with others for some time. I also realized I needed to have spiritual direction intentionally built into my own life.

One of the things that became clear to me in that process was my lack of community. That translated in part to a lack of accountability. I had seen that in my associate who had involved himself in the affair. I realized what a dangerously unaccountable life I led and the threat that posed to my own soul. I could tell my secretary that I was going across town to an associational meeting or to visit hospitals and be gone all day, and no one would question where I was. People assumed my integrity, as they had assumed that of my associate. No one ever asked me about my relationship with God. Was I praying? Was I listening to God? Was I engaging Scripture? Was I sharing my faith? Was I worshipping? They assumed I was. After all I was the pastor. This is what I mean by the lack of community. No one knew me. But no one understood what I was up against.

Three things happened to remedy that. First, I determined to find a spiritual director. A visit to a local Roman Catholic retreat center provided me with a wonderful and unforgettable encounter with an elderly priest whom, I suspect, may never have had a conversation with a Baptist pastor before, not about the things we spoke of. He might have become my spiritual director, but a new assignment was taking him out of the city. Someone at the center recommended I call Mike Luedde, a Presbyterian pastor who had trained at the Cenacle in Houston in spiritual direction. I called Mike. He turned out to be about ten years my senior, a little further to the left theologically, and full of prejudices about Baptists. That was thirteen years ago. Mike and I have been meeting monthly for coffee and prayerful conversation ever since. Someone knows about my life with God. Someone understands. That has been transformational.

Second, I became part of a small group of pastors, what we have come to refer to as a "community of grace and truth." We met monthly for four years. At various times each one of us walked through some painfully difficult times with families or congregations. I just happened to go first. One of the guys, Jim Herrington, was the executive director of our Baptist association at the time. After a conversation with me one day, he called four others and asked us if we would be interested in a retreat for a couple of days. In that context we opened our lives to each other and then began to do so regularly, as a discipline. I think it saved my vocation.

Third, I began to learn what I could about family systems and relationships. I read, studied, attended conferences and seminars, and found a coach, Victoria Harrison, who studied with Murray Bowen in Georgetown. Along the way I wrote a book with my friends Jim Herrington and Trisha Taylor about how those principles affect the life of a leader. Learning to be a self, present and accounted for in all my relationships, is an on-going process for me. Community again is the place where transformation occurs.

I am preparing in the next few weeks to return to the classroom, this time to a seminary. I will once more have to restructure community in my life. This time, however, I will not need a crisis to point me in that direction.

Christian Community and Ministry to Seafarers

I realize it is entirely possible that many of you have done incredibly well in anchoring your life securely in the protective port of Christian community. But the possibility also exists that port chaplains and maritime ministers are just as human as the pastors I know and as the one I look at in the mirror. You may be just as prone as we to allow busyness, pride, and self-sufficiency to keep you isolated and lonely. In that case it would be worthwhile to remind you of the vital need you have to establish such transformative relationships firmly in your own life, and to see that you make yourself available to such relationships in the lives of others who serve with you.

This is where theology becomes practice. To have a sound theology of the church as the body of Christ is one thing. To put it into practice by entering into relationships that penetrate beyond the superficiality that marks our culture is something else. To know and to be known by a few others who share our life in Christ is the practical application of this aspect of our ecclesiology.

To have an orthodox expression of the doctrine of sanctification is one thing. To put it into practice by pursuing relationships with other believers that make personal transformation a possibility is something else. To learn to be a self and to allow others to do so is the practical expression of this aspect of our soteriology.

So, my apologies if this portion of the presentation sounds preachy. I will risk that in order to be practical. But I will phrase that practicality as seven questions that cover the territory for me.

- Where in your life is there someone who knows how you spend your day, how you spend your time, and who understands both the joy and the frustrations of your work?
- Where in your life is someone who knows the status of your life of prayer, your experiences of worship, your acts of service, your encounters with Scripture?
- Where in your life is someone who knows your temptations, your struggles, your moral vulnerabilities, victories and failures?
- Where in your life are you playing that role for others?
- Where is Christian community being experienced in your life at a level in which transformation is taking place for you and for the other?
- What steps could be taken to assure that such relationships are there for you? What would be the first step?

- What would need to change in order for such community to become integral to your life? What would you need to let go of in your heart, your attitudes, or your schedule?

You may have your work cut out for you to find such relationships among those with whom you share the task of ministry, but that would be the richest vein to mine. Getting beyond isolation, competition, and superficiality is often the challenge. But what treasure is there for those who do! Transformation becomes a possibility. In the fires of such relationships our character changes and takes on more that of Christ. We are formed. We are shaped. We are healed. We become deeper people, stronger people, more loving people.

When it comes to managing ourselves in relationships, however, human beings are notoriously lazy. We will keep doing what we have been doing regardless of whether it is getting us where we most want to go. We practice the insanity of doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting different results. We have a saying in systems thinking, that “the system is perfectly designed for the present results.” If you like what you are getting, then don’t change anything.

I leave you this morning with a story from Kennon Callahan, a Methodist church consultant whose work has been immensely helpful to me over the years. It is a story about making changes.

“We were sailing that year in the Bahamas, Julie and I and our five- and seven-year-old sons. We had a wonderful sailboat we had chartered. We were having a grand time.

“Late one afternoon, a storm came up. The seas began to roll and rise. We learned over the shortwave that, far off, a hurricane was swirling. We were getting the fringe effect from the hurricane. The seas became uncomfortably high, choppy, rough. We headed toward a deserted island – a “key,” they call them in the Bahamas. According to the map, there was a small harbor where we could anchor our boat and be protected from the storm.

“Near dusk, we made our way into the little harbor of the deserted island. The island was smaller than the map made it appear, and there was a huge coral reef toward the back and on one side of the harbor. We set our anchor to ride out the storm that night. The little bit of beach and island did block the waves from us. It was comparatively comfortable. We settled in.

“It wasn’t too long before the boat began to drift toward the coral reef. The anchor had slipped. We pulled the anchor up, repositioned the boat with the inboard motor, dropped the anchor on what we thought would be firmer bottom, and began to make preparations for the night. Not too much later, the anchor slipped again. We set it again.

“As we went to bed that night, we decided to stand watch so that, should the anchor slip yet another time, we would not find ourselves on the coral reef. So here were a five-year-old and a seven-year-old, Julie, and I taking turns at watch that night. The anchor did slip several times. I would be awakened, if it was not my watch. We would set the anchor and it would last for a while. Then, we would have to set it again.

“In the morning, after a nearly sleepless night, we could see that the storm out in the ocean was continuing in its fury. The storm was not going anywhere, nor were we.

“The harbor clearly had a soft bottom and anchors would not hold, so I decided to do what is sometimes done, namely carry the anchor to shore, carry it up the beach a ways, dig it deep into the beach, and then it would hold.

“Julie had the inboard motor going slowly, just moving us forward. I was standing on the bow of the boat, holding this huge anchor in my arms, looking down into the water. It was clear. The water in the Bahamas is so clear you can see almost forever.

“I stepped off into what I thought was shallow water. Halfway down, it dawned on me that if I let go of the anchor I would probably quit sinking. It came to me that the one one in trouble was me. The anchor was safely secured to the boat by a chain and a line. I was the one in trouble. I finally let go of the anchor and quit sinking.

“That event has occasioned a saying in our family, to be, I am sure, passed down from one generation to the next: ‘If you want to sink fast, be sure to hold on to an anchor.’”⁷

¹ Unless otherwise noted, biblical quotations are taken from the New International Version (NIV).

² Stephen Seamands, *Ministry in the Image of God: The Trinitarian Shape of Christian Service* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2005), 35.

³ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2002), 19.

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), 17.

⁵ *Ibid*, 20.

⁶ Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person* (London: Constable, 1961), 26.

⁷ Kennon L. Callahan, *Twelve Keys for Living: Possibilities for a Whole, Healthy Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 33-34.