

Sept. 8, 2019
Jer 18:1-11
Lk 14:25-33

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“Commitments & Other Costly Things”

Good morning, dear friends. It is good to be with you again, to join with you in worship and fellowship – after three months away on sabbatical, it is a gift to me to share space and time together again in this sanctuary. Above all, it is a reminder to me of the truly foundational significance of *relationship*, of *belonging*, of *fellowship*, which are, indeed, important marks of the Spirit’s ongoing work in the congregation, the community of faith.

Relationships involve commitment, and commitments are costly things. To be in relationship with another entails certain obligations and responsibilities, which can sometimes feel demanding of us, even while they may breathe life into us. Relationships open up for us the possibility for mutual love and care, while also creating the potential for misunderstanding or conflict and division and even violence and abuse. We are never in relationship in a general or abstract way. We are always in relationship to someone or something in particular – and there are often subtle or not-so-subtle ways that power dynamics always shape our relations to one another. Relationships happen in space and time within a variety of networks of power. Relationships are forged *over* time, relationships *take* time and because of this relationships do not ever remain merely stagnant.

I have been a husband, a partner, to Marcia, for over 15 years. But there is a particularity to our relationship that makes it very difficult for me to imagine what it might mean to be a husband or a partner in a general way. And I have been a father to Owen for almost 13 years. I remember friends and family asking me before Owen was born, *are you excited to be a father?* I never did know how to answer this question. For one is not a father in some kind of general way. How would I know what it would mean to be a father to someone *before* I had even encountered them!? Before I entered into a concrete relationship to Owen, a relationship that changes in time and over time, and now to Aleida and to Wendy, fatherhood was simply an abstract idea, not a relationship. Honestly, I have felt similar things about being a pastor. I am not a pastor in general. But I am a pastor in particular, concretely in relationship to each of you here at Faith Mennonite Church, and at times and perhaps this is simply a part of the peculiar function of a pastor, I find that my relationships have shifted with others so that I, for example, have begun to relate pastorally to people I encounter in the community or my students at the universities where I teach.

I am also a friend, but I am not a friend in general. I am a friend to particular people. Now of course we may draw from our experiences in relationships to imagine something like a blueprint or a guide for how to fulfill relationships better, but so often our relationships resist easy characterizations. Of course there is perhaps much to be gained by guidance from others as we navigate relationships – whether it be through self-help books or therapists, but ultimately, our relationships involve complexities that, at the end of the day, can only be shaped and reshaped, well, in the course of our actual relationships.

One of the things that I have learned over the past year or so is the power of *communication* as a dimension of the fabric of personal relationships. When Nuria and her family first moved into our

home, we didn't know a lick of Spanish, and this kept us, at times, from entering into a deeper relationship. Really basic things like sharing and listening to each other's stories, not to mention expressing our needs and desires to one another were quite difficult. Because I have grown in my love for Nuria, and because I desire a deeper relationship with her, I have found myself on a journey to learn her language, Spanish. This journey has really been entirely driven by relationship for me, and this concrete relationship has led me to the concrete commitment to learn Spanish. As most of you know, our family traveled to Guatemala this summer to study Spanish together and to experience the people and land of Central America. After the service today Marcia and I will spend some time sharing with you about our experiences there. We decided to visit Central America because of our relationships and our deepening commitments to the struggle of migrant people whom we have come to know and love from Latin America. And really for no other reason. Learning a language is a very strange experience. Each day we would attend Spanish classes. Marcia and I shared a teacher and at some point it dawned on me that we weren't learning *about* Spanish so much as we were simply getting to know our teacher! I realized, well, that's the whole point! Unlike so much of what I studied in graduate school, learning Spanish has this incredibly practical and immediate pay-off! For those of you have learned a language know this, and you also know it takes commitment.

In our passages for today we have two stories that deal with our relationships and our commitments. In the Bible, God is almost always depicted as *relational*. In the Jeremiah passage for today God is portrayed with this beautiful image of a potter working at his wheel. The vessel that the potter has in his hands is an image for Israel, the people of God. As potter God's relationship to God's vessel, Israel, is one who creates, destroys, shapes and reshapes. This is a text that is seemingly meant to signify, at least in part, the terrifying magnitude of the power of this God in relation to God's people, Israel, who are portrayed passively, even if also responsible agents. After all, this is a call to repentance, a call to change paths, to turn away from evil ways - or, perhaps it can be read as a call to Israel, the vessel, to *change its relationships and commitments*, the relational patterns and modes of belonging to God and neighbor.

In our Gospel reading from Luke we encounter another passage that deals with our relationships and commitments. Jesus begins with: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." Now, we usually do not consider "hate" to be a fruit of the Spirit; most of us think of hate as the antithesis of love. And certainly we may read these passages as perhaps a bit hyperbolic - afterall, in the same Gospel Jesus implores his disciples to love their enemies, not to hate them. So what could Jesus be after here? My sense is that the call to "hate" here may be similar to the prophetic call of Jeremiah: it is about the concrete demands of *relationship*, and it is about the particular demands of what it means to be in relationship to Jesus of Nazareth, which involves a certain kind of renunciation, a movement away or even against pre-existing patterns of relationship that may become obstacles in the way of a new kind of relationship, one that moves in a genuinely new direction.

It is perhaps more typical to hear talk of the importance of "personal relationship with Jesus" from evangelical Christians. It is not too common to hear this kind of language among Mennonites, at least in my experience. More often, we speak of *discipleship*. But discipleship is also a mode of relation, and indeed it is quite personal. There is no such thing as being a disciple in general. There is only discipleship as a mode of relation to someone or something in particular. Discipleship of Jesus involves a *personal relationship*, even if not in the evangelical sense of the phrase. To be a disciple is

not primarily to be in a relationship to a particular set of ideas or teachings or doctrines or traditions. It is not primarily about going to a particular church building or fulfilling certain kinds of tasks, though it may include these things. To be a disciple is to be in a living relationship with a *person*, a person who speaks, who communicates, who loves and calls us into a way of living that is altogether new. And this new relationship entails commitment, which is precisely why Anabaptists insist on the voluntary character of faith. The truth of God as revealed in the person of Jesus of Nazareth is not a general timeless idea. It is a *way*. It is a concrete relation – it is a “happening” in space and time between persons. Christ as the Word of God addresses us, speaks to us, in space and time, calls us each in the particularity of our daily lives to enter into a new relationship. And this relationship entails commitments, and these commitments are costly.

To enter into a relationship with Jesus of Nazareth is to enter into a relationship with a person in the lived realities of our daily lives. There is no blueprint for how to do this – for the relationship entails a specificity, concreteness, that is unique to each of us, even as we participate and walk along our paths together. You cannot be a disciple of Jesus *for* me or on my behalf, even if you may come to bear my burdens. In the same way, I cannot be a disciple *for* you, even as my discipleship is bound up in important ways with yours. To be in relationship with Jesus is always bound up with our *relationship to our neighbor*. Discipleship is never independent of the variety of relationships and networks of relationships in which we live our lives. Of course, we love our family and those closest to us. This is only natural and it is very important. Because it is here where we begin to learn about what relationship looks like – we learn what it looks like to cry and be held by our mothers or our fathers, among all sorts of other things. But is it not also the case that to love what we view and assume to be “our own” can at times become an obstacle to love of our neighbor? Have we not seen the ways that love of only “our own” has a tendency to erect borders and barriers? Perhaps, in this passage in Luke, Jesus is calling his disciples to release our love, to allow our relations to those around us to move outward – to break out and to break free from our narrowly defined identities and boundaries and attachments, the narrowness of our relationships, to the things we presume to possess, to what we call “our own.”

At Faith Mennonite Church we have been on a journey to welcome migrant people, to welcome a new language, to welcome new experiences, to welcome new kinds of relationships. These new relationships draw us out of the comfortability that enclosed fellowship and belonging can bring. It is easy to become enclosed in our relationships, to become enclosed within what is familiar, what we cherish to be “our own,” and we are not immune from it. We see this right now on a national scale – well, it has been foundational to the US throughout its history – the ideology of enclosure – from European colonialism, to the frontier, to the border, sustained by militarism at home and abroad – national identity has been characterized by enclosure, exploitation, removal, and genocide all in the name of the superiority of something called “white identity.”

It is difficult to enter into new relationships across lines of difference, in part, because such relationships change us, reshape us, and even sometimes destroy what we once took to be “our own.” And new relationships, when they are genuine and mutual, lead us to new commitments and responsibilities, which entail new costs to our identity. But I think this is part of what it means to be a *fellowship* of believers who are *disciples* of a person whose entire way of living and acting is to *break the bonds* of oppression through the power of love. A fellowship of disciples in relation to this person always bursts through walls of enclosure and extends to the other as *neighbor* in a way that *breaks*

through and upends the various modes of belonging that the world offers. I will never forget what Marcia said to me soon after Nuria and her family arrived in our home and in our church. She said, “I will never let them take her away. I will stand between them and her.” I think this is what love looks like. This is the power that relationship brings to our commitments, to the concrete realities and relationships that make up our lives. The outworking of our commitment to discipleship of Jesus happens in our collective work for peace and justice as a community; and the faithfulness of this work is to be measured by our willingness to be broken open, to be destroyed and reshaped, to new and life-altering relationships and commitments, by the ways we extend or withhold, open or enclose, our lives in relation to our neighbors. In a sense our calling as a fellowship of disciples just is to extend and open ourselves up to new connections, to forge new and very concrete bonds of community. As a majority white and relatively affluent fellowship of disciples this takes place through collective solidarity with people in struggle, *not in a general way*, but with people in particular, people in the very fabric of community. It is precisely through the deepening of the bonds of concrete relationships that we hear and respond to the invitation of the gospel. The theologian Carter Heyward once said that “Justice is the fruit of human passion, deep love that is willing to bear up fear and tension and uncertainty in relation to persons, issues, and possibilities known and unknown.” In a sense, we might say, that the task of the fellowship of disciples, at the heart of what it means to be a church, just is to forge new relationships of belonging rooted, passionately, in deep love.