

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for January 11, 2008  
Lessons: Genesis 2:4b-9,18, Mark 1:9-11 and Philippians 1:1-14

## IT'S NOT RELATIVE, IT'S RELATIONAL

We look at life each day and, seeing a vast array of events in progress all around us, try to make sense of it all by fitting the different pieces — this, that, and the other thing all happening at once — into some structure, some model, in our minds. We need to do our best to make sense of life, but, of course, the world out there is not doing its best to make sense to you or me. Things are happening, whether they make sense to us or not.

It matters what model we use most. A shortsighted and purely selfish person would use a “me” model. Does this make me feel good or bad? Does that give me what I want, right now? We all have a touch of shortsighted selfishness, but I feel safe in saying none of us uses that model as a primary way to organize life mentally and understand it. We have relationships we value and responsibilities to which we are committed. As an adult, I have to know life is not all about me; otherwise, I could not function as an adult, and my life would be a disaster.

Many people seem to assume, whether it pleases them or not, that the Bible and, therefore, Christian faith are organized on a model of absolute truth and absolute authority. God is absolutely good; evil is Satanic and, therefore, absolutely bad. There is right, and there is wrong — for all people in all situations. In this model, the most important force is authority. Younger people, lesser people, and all in need of correction must be made to obey those God has set above them in authority — God being at the very top, absolutely. Few people work with this model exclusively because it can be so harsh, but many presume it to be the principal model of Christian faith, which I think keeps many people away from the church and others spiritually depressed within the church. The faith, they believe, is about authority and obedience to authority. Certainly, plenty of Bible verses can be (and are) used to support this model, but it is not the primary model for a truly biblical view of life. God's authority is not the Bible's main concern at all, and so when the authoritarian model is used as the framework for understanding the Bible, people are led astray.

Genesis 2 sets the tone. Face to face, God breathes into the human being the breath of life. From the outset and with every breath we draw, life is relational, represented as “face to face” with God. But even then, the human remains incomplete. God creates us with a need for each other. “It is not good for the human to be alone.” Step by step, Genesis shows

us that we are made to live in relation to the earth and its other creatures and that we have built into us the need for community and for varying degrees of intimacy with other people. We are made to need relationships, to be loved and to love. The primary model for life and principal world view of the Bible is relational, and the essential concerns of the Bible are presented in relational language.

Sin is a relational concept in the Bible, not a legalistic one. It is not about breaking laws or commandments but about violating relationships — our rightful relationship with God and our relationships with other people, whom God loves also. Jesus sums up all God's commands in two: to love God wholeheartedly, with all our resources and abilities, and to love the other person (our neighbor) as we love and care for ourselves. The Ten Commandments themselves are relational, not absolute and authoritarian. That's why Jesus can sum them all up as matters of love. He's not watering down the commandments; he is giving them back their true purpose, which is to build human relationships and human community in response to God's love. So, he insists, for example, that it is not enough for me to restrain myself from killing another person, if I am only going to continue unchecked with hating that person and doing or even wishing my enemy harm. Commandment after commandment Jesus turns back to its true purpose, which is not to bring life under authoritarian control but to make all of life responsive to God's love.

If we are going to understand the Bible, we need to break the old model, the authoritarian model, and rediscover the grace, mercy, kindness, restorative justice, and pervasive love of God. Will authority then have no place at all in our system of belief? Yes, it will have a place, but subordinate to love, rather than the other way around. In a truly biblical model, authority is a stewardship and a matter of service, not of dominance and control. In the authoritarian model, authority measures out love and respect as permitted by judgment, but judgment always takes precedence. Love is thus reduced to a reward for the right behavior and deference to authority. That's not really love; it's just approval that shows some affection when judgment allows. In the authoritarian model, the rules are more important than people. So, in frustration, Jesus tells his legalistic critics that "the Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath."

As Jesus emerges from his baptism, his affirmation from God is not, "You are the chosen one to embody my authority on earth; make people do as you say." No, it's, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Jesus begins his ministry headed, not toward Caesar's throne, but toward the cross to give himself for us and all this world's people alienated from God and from each other.

From the time of Israel's enslavement in Egypt, the God of the Bible has persistently entered human relations at the bottom of the heap to break the system and liberate all of us

from it — first of all the oppressed but also the people in more comfortable positions of relative privilege. Evil is the rejection of God’s love and dehumanization of others.

Are not the greatest evils and most persistent cruelties inflicted upon people in the name of authority, to keep them under control and punish them for daring to stand up to tyranny or even question its authority? Such cruelties happen all around us every day, at every level of human interaction, to keep one person or group subordinate to another. Self-righteousness, especially when it feels empowered by divine authority and religious truth, can be incredibly heartless. Taken to extremes, it sees everything in terms of submission to its authority, and its fury at dissent can be terrible. When authoritarian religion, Christian or otherwise, has made alliance with authoritarian government, the results have given history its most gruesome chapters. Think of the extreme cruelties inflicted these days upon women in societies where male dominance is considered divine right and any show of freedom or desire for dignity is treated as an offense against God. Women have been beaten publicly and even buried alive for accidentally showing the bare skin of an arm or leg. Yes, that’s extreme indeed, but it’s only the extreme of the authoritarian model, not a different spirit from its milder forms of disregard for people in favor of rules and control.

“I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel . . .” Paul is in prison and may be facing execution, but God, he says, is turning the evil of his imprisonment to good purpose. Then the apostle tells the Philippians what he wants for them whether he lives or dies, and nature of it is most important. He writes, “And this is my prayer, *that your love may overflow* more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.” The prayer is that our knowledge and insight will come from love.

In a few moments, we will stand and say, “I believe in God the Father Almighty.” Well, “Father almighty” is not a biblical term, and surely we know the damage done every day in our world by “fathers” almighty, whether literal, political, or “spiritual” fathers. I say the words of the creed, though, as from the Bible and most of all from Jesus, I know the Father of whom it speaks to be the One whose truth is love, whose justice is to restore rather than condemn, and whose will breaks the world’s cruel systems of tyranny, whether they operate in nations or households. In the bank Friday, I saw a young woman with a black eye. I don’t know how she got it, but I saw how it looked, and her image comes to mind this morning when I think about the words, “This is my body, broken for you.” Amen.