

The Seductiveness of Co-Dependency

Pentecost 8

Luke 10:38-42

Sunday, July 22, 2007

by Dr. Frank Trotter

As you will discover in time, I am a collector of jokes, some of them OK, some rather lame, and a few of them stellar, I suppose. Because the topic of today's sermon is "codependency," I collected several appropriate jokes to share with you:

- You're codependent for sure if, when you die, someone else's life flashes in front of your eyes.
- You're codependent for sure when you wake up in the morning and say to your mate, "Good morning, how am I?"
- You're codependent if people consider your spouse a Saint for reasons that totally escape you.
- You're codependent if you buy two copies of every self-help book that comes along – one to read for yourself and the second to pass on to someone who really needs it!

Of course we know that the implications of codependent behavior can be very serious and are not to be taken lightly.

Michael Vick, the celebrated and now infamous quarterback for the Atlanta Falcons, was indicted this week for behavior regarding dog fighting and the care of these animals that, if proven to be true, is truly disgusting. Sports columnist Mike Lopresti wrote in *USA Today* this week: "A star has been tarnished. Perhaps he is innocent, perhaps not... And the public, left with another hero under another cloud, will have to decide where its own faith lies. You up there in the grandstands. Can you cheer for a man accused of hanging young dogs if they were not vicious enough to fight well? Will that matter when there is a crucial third down for the Atlanta Falcons to convert? It should... [but] it is depressing and amazing how the sense of propriety can face in the face of celebrity and victory. One possible reason why so many [athletes] have behaved so foolishly, without a visible shred of accountability to their team or their profession? Because history says they can. Come game time, the people will always forget..."¹

¹ Mike Lopresti, "Athlete's worshipful public again has decision to make," *USA Today*, Thursday, July 19, 2007, 7C. Mr. Lopresti is an occasional sports columnist for *USA Today*.

David Rieff, in an article printed on the Opinion page of this morning's *Los Angeles Times*, raises the issue of codependency in relation to the sexual abuse crisis within the Roman Catholic Church. He writes, "At first glance, it seems difficult to imagine how Cardinal Roger M. Mahony can survive the pedophile scandal. Far from putting the matter to rest, the \$660-million settlement that the Archdiocese of Los Angeles has agreed to pay the victims of the abuse – child rape, alas, is often the more accurate term – can only lead to further wonder, and worry, about the cardinal's conduct throughout the course of the scandal."² But Rieff goes on to wonder if Cardinal Mahony will be held to account to explain how he dealt with the troubled priests who abused those under their care or whether silence – even of the face of a staggering financial settlement – will continue to be the standard.

Of course we know that the problem of sexual abuse can happen within any church community including the United Methodist Church of which we are a part. And we know that the temptation to be silent about painful or complicated issues can come to all of us even as we gather to praise God.

In the midst of the widespread debate on the merits of the war in Iraq, there are those on each side on the issue who believe that those on the other are blatantly codependent. Last Monday, Eric Edelman, the Undersecretary for Defense, created something of a furor when he issued a public letter criticizing Senator Hillary Clinton for remarks she made last May in which she urged the Pentagon to develop a plan to withdraw forces from Iraq. Edelman wrote, "Premature and public discussion of the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq reinforces enemy propaganda that the United States will abandon its allies... Such talk understandably unnerves the very same Iraqi allies we are asking to assume enormous personal risks."³

The implication, of course, is that Senator Clinton and others who share her view may be intentionally, unwittingly or carelessly co-dependent with al Qaeda, thereby undermining the Iraqi government and its allies and giving encouragement to the terrorists. To those who hold this view, waging the

² David Rieff, "The Teflon Cardinal," Opinion, *Los Angeles Times*, Sunday, July 22, 2007, http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-op-rieff22copyjul22_0,2757313.story?coll=la-opinion-center. Mr. Rieff is a policy analyst, author, and the only child of Susan Sontag.

³ Eric Edelman, "Pentagon Aide Says Clinton Helps Enemy," *New York Times*, Friday, July 20, 2007, A16, www.nytimes.com/2007/07/20/washington/20pentagon.html?_r=1&oref=slogin. Mr. Edelman is the Undersecretary for Defense in the Bush Administration.

war in Iraq is absolutely essential to the preservation of the values upon which our country was founded.

On the other side of the debate, Paul Krugman, a syndicated columnist and professor of economics and international affairs at Princeton University, wrote this week in the *New York Times*: “While Mr. Bush no longer has many true believers, he still has plenty of enablers – people who understand the folly of his actions, but refuse to do anything to stop him..., [who] still refuse, out of political caution and careerism, to do anything about it.”⁴ To those who share this view, Iraq has become a morass of bad decisions, colossal debt, and the alienation of vast communities within the Middle East; to insist on continuing the war in the face of these problems is to blindly continue to support dysfunctional policies.

My guess is that there are those of us on both sides of this argument on co-dependency in relation to the war in Iraq here this morning in church, as there are those of us here who have widely different points of view on a whole variety of complicated problems that face the nation. In many ways, we represent the flux in society but unfortunately don't know how to talk with each other about our differences. Anger is often easier than communication.

Some of us may believe that it's just not appropriate to talk in church about Michael Vick, the problems of sexual misconduct within the church, or the war in Iraq. And that belief, of course, is a characteristic of codependent behavior and its seductiveness. Whenever we keep any problematic or controversial issue out of the sanctuary, we create a climate of silence that is contrary to the ministry of Jesus Christ.

But what if some of us really do want to break dysfunctional patterns? What if we really do come to the decision that we need to discover what the “eternal truths” for our life might be? How do we do that? How do we take responsibility for our own actions and behavior?

The gospel of Luke provides us with a story of a woman named Mary who amazingly decides to go against all of the conventions and expectations of her cultural in first century Israel to order to find the better way. It is a story,

⁴ Paul Krugman, “All the President's Enablers,” Op-ed Column, *New York Times*, Friday, July 20, 2007, A23.

as biblical scholar Dr. Alan Culpepper tells us, that “highlights the overriding importance of devotion to the Lord’s Word as an expression of one’s love to God...”⁵

Two sisters, Martha and Mary, open their home to Jesus as he travels from one village to the next proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. Within moments of his arrival, Martha begins to prepare a meal for him and the disciples. When she turns around to share the work with Mary, she is astounded to discover that Mary is in the living room sitting on the floor at Jesus’ feet. “What does she think she’s doing?” Martha must have wondered. The narrator of the story makes the point that her agitation is increased because she has become distracted by her many tasks. She puts down her apron, comes into the living room, and pointedly says in front of her sister, “Lord, don’t you care that Mary has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to come help me!”

Having interesting relationships with my own siblings, I find myself wondering about this one. Could it be that Martha has always been the sister who gets everything done and that Mary is always the one who daydreams? Could it be that there has always been an inequality in whether or not Mary pulls her equal weight? And could it be that the presence of Jesus, this charismatic man to whom both of them have been drawn, is already upsetting the chemistry of dependence and codependence between them?

Martha knows that Mary is breaking all the rules. She knows, as Dr. Culpepper points out, that “by sitting at Jesus’ feet, Mary is acting like a male. She neglects her duty to assist her sister in the preparation of the meal, and by violating a clear social boundary she is bringing shame upon her house...”⁶

In Jesus’ famous response to the agitated sister, he says, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset by many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.” In my imagination, I also hear him say, “Martha, Martha, you are trapped in your old behavior. Your need to take care of Mary has limited both her and

⁵ R. Alan Culpepper, “The Gospel of Luke: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflection,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 231. Dr. Culpepper is Dean of the McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University in Atlanta, Georgia.

⁶ Ibid.

you in the past. She is breaking free of that symbiotic relationship the two of you have maintained, and so must you!”

What is it that helps Mary break free of her own past behavior? We can never be certain for the story does not tell us. What it does say is that she suddenly finds herself sitting at Jesus’ feet – and in that decision, we find an example of spiritual contemplation on the word of God, an example that stirs all of us who haven’t yet found the time to do that.

Dr. Culpepper suggests that Mary’s behavior was scandalous and that Jesus’ implicit invitation to her was equally scandalous. Yet Jesus nevertheless tells us that “the codes of the kingdom [of God describe] a society without distinctions and boundaries between its members. The rules of that society are just two – to love God and one’s neighbor – but these rules are so radically different from those of the society in which we live that living by them calls us to disregard all else, break the rules, and follow Jesus’ example.”⁷

This story, as theologian William Loader suggests, is “annoying, especially for people who are comfortable with established patterns and roles.”⁸ We are particularly bothered by the thought of who might feel they are invited or entitled to sit there – those of different socio-economic levels, sexual orientations, racial or ethnic identifies, gender, age, handicapping conditions among many categories.

The primary and unsettling question continues to be whether we choose to stay annoyed in our intransigence or whether we hear the invitation of Jesus to take the first step away from old behavior.

I’ve recently begun to go through both the attendance cards that members and visitors sign each Sunday morning as well as the prayer cards that have been placed in the box at the rear of the Sanctuary.

As I’ve done this I find myself often moved by those named or unnamed who indicate they would like prayers for a friend or loved one who is struggling with codependency: it may concern an addictive behavior,

⁷ Ibid., 232.

⁸ William Loader, “First Thoughts on Year C Gospel Passages from the Lectionary,” <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/LkPentecost8.htm>. Dr. Loader is a member of the faculty at Murdoch University, Perth, Australia that is affiliated with the Uniting Church in Australia.

destructive relationship, or a disastrous decision from which the individual cannot or will not pull away.

On occasion, however, the person signing has already figured out at least part of the puzzle of a new direction. There are a couple of people who've worshiped here in the past few weeks (and I need to tell you that I am a long way from associating names and faces) who have written next to their name: "Want to become more regular members."

Now it's a blessing when you read a card where someone indicates that they simply want to become a member. But to want to become a more regular member is a much rarer blessing. It might be said that it is similar in a way to Mary's decision to take a new road, a new path, to turn away from the seductiveness of codependency that keeps us right where we are.

Perhaps Charles Wesley, the younger brother of John Wesley who was the founder of the Methodist tradition, had it right when he noted that the healthiest behavior comes when all of us offer our very best to God, regardless of the changes that decision will inevitably bring in our lives. In one of the over 5,000 hymns that he wrote, Charles Wesley says:

Lo! I come with joy to do the Master's blessed will,
him in outward works pursue, and serve his pleasure still;
faithful to my Lord's commands, I still would choose the better part,
serve with careful Martha's hands, and loving Mary's heart.⁹

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁹ Charles Wesley, quoted at Wesley Center Online, "Charles Wesley's Hymn Lyrics," http://wesley.nnu.edu/charles_wesley/hymns/wesley_lyrics-b.htm.