

**First Parish UU, Bridgewater**  
**Worship Service – Soul Matters Theme: “Trust”**  
**Sunday, February 3, 2019 10:30am**

**Thought for Contemplation:** “Crocodiles are easy. They try to kill and eat you. People are harder. Sometimes they pretend to be your friend first.” ~Steve Irwin, famed wild animal trainer

**Sermon**                    **“Breaking Trust”**                    Rev. Paul Sprecher

Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī, the thirteenth-century Islamic poet and mystic whose words are the source of our hymn “Come, Come, Whoever You Are,” tells this story of "Sheikh Kharrāqani and His Wretched Wife: "

A young religious seeker heard of one Sheikh who could bestow peace to a conflicted mind with a single glance. He set off on the long journey to the mountains where the Sheikh was believed to live.

The young man arrived at the Sheikh's house and knocked on the door. The teacher's wife stuck her head out of the window and asked, screaming, what he wanted. The young man replied that he intended to see the great, holy teacher. The Sheikh's wife let loose with a barrage of insults, recriminations, and accusations, calling the Sheikh a parasite and a fraud and the young man a fool. The seeker was taken aback, but undeterred. He told the woman that her angry words could not stop his quest for wisdom. "For you to try to blow out this candle is as futile as for you to try to blow out the sun."

And so the seeker continued his search. He went into town and learned that the teacher was in the forest collecting firewood. The young man hurried

to the forest, but now his mind was troubled. Why would such an enlightened teacher have such a wretched, miserable wife?

Suddenly, the teacher appeared riding on a lion. The teacher had not only the power to quiet and tame the wildest of beasts, but he also read the doubt in the mind of the young man. The Sheikh immediately answered the unspoken question of the seeker. He told the young man that he had not chosen his wife and that he did not desire her company. He was committed to her, but for reasons of his own. "It is not her perfume or bright colored clothes. Enduring her public disdain has made me strong and patient. She is my *practice*."<sup>1</sup>

I have had occasion to perform a few weddings over the past fifteen years and I have always insisted on taking time to do some premarital counseling before setting to work on the service itself. I like to say I'm not in the wedding business; I'm in the marriage business. Always we try to explore the kinds of conflicts that will inevitably come up in the course of the marriage so that when disagreements come – as they will – there will be at least a vague memory in the back of the partner's minds that they had been warned this would happen and that there are strategies for deepening love by working together – especially by talking together in a respectful way about their difficulties. We practice a style of communication that many have found helpful in which one partner simply says what's on their mind – concerns, hopes and dreams, pending conflicts – while the other just listens without judgment and then in turn says back what he or she has heard. Then the roles reverse. This kind of honest but non-

judgmental speaking and listening can often help to unblock the emotions on each side and lead to a deeper commitment.

Of course, this applies to many partnerships that never become marriages as well. I often ask couples – almost all of whom have been living together for a time already – why they have chosen to marry rather than to continue simply being and living together. Marriage, I find, often marks a decision to seek embark on a deeper, more permanent commitment – maybe for the sake of having children, perhaps simply to acknowledge that a relationship has deepened to the point that a lasting expression of commitment before family and friends is in order.

Half a century ago, it was common to speak of a “7-year itch” setting in. Nowadays I think it comes sooner – a one or two year itch. I suspect that social media have some role in this – everyone on FaceBook is highlighting the best parts of their lives while each of us knows that our own lives are not so full of highlights only. And of course the expectations of marriage have changed over the past half-century and more. It is well known that as many as half of marriages end in divorce.

What is too often lost as marriages disintegrate is that many of us have unconsciously chosen a partner who complements our own strengths and weaknesses. We are often attracted to partners who are just enough different from ourselves to offer an opportunity to begin to see our own blind spots, the places where we have room to grow. Not infrequently, our conviction of our

own inherent righteousness leads us to think that the problem lies in the fact that the partner needs to be fixed up to be more in line with our own expectations and biases and prejudices and ways of relating. Here is where there is an opportunity for deepening love by observing ourselves more closely than our partner, by listening more than speaking, by seeking more to love than to be loved, as the prayer of St. Francis of Assisi has it.

“She is my practice,” says the Sheik. We get better when we practice, when we can live out having he/they/she as our practice.

I do not mean to say that all marriages and partnerships should last “till death do us part.” There are miserable spouses and partners who should never have chosen one another. There are partners who are abusers. There are those who abandon their partners whether emotionally or physically. Partners cheat on each other, tragedies too grave to bear make continued partnership impossible, or economic pressures become insuperable. Trust is betrayed in ways that cannot be repaired. I do not mean to say that couples should stay together in misery decade after decade. But I do think that too often partners give up on relationships just at the point where there is an opportunity to deepen rather than end the relationship, where a recognition that we are engaged in finding opportunities to grow ourselves by learning from one another – making one another our practice – might make us better rather than more miserable.

“This is my practice,” said the Sheikh.

Another story [Luke 15:11-32]:

<sup>11</sup> “There was a man who had two sons. <sup>12</sup> The younger one said to his father, ‘Father, give me my share of the estate.’ So he divided his property between them. <sup>13</sup> Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living. <sup>14</sup> After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. <sup>15</sup> So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. <sup>16</sup> He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything. <sup>17</sup> When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! <sup>18</sup> I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. <sup>19</sup> I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ <sup>20</sup> So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”

You know the rest of the story of the prodigal son, of course. The father prepares a feast to welcome his errant son home, preparing the best and richest party that can be imagined. There’s a painting by Rembrandt that celebrates the moment of reconciliation. In that painting you can notice the warm embrace between father and son.

I have sometimes thought of myself as a prodigal son. I left our farm in Wisconsin to come to school in Boston, went home for a year to prepare to become a teacher, and then went to a distant city far away – New York, in my case – and fell in with a group of people very different from my family. We were all in therapy with analysts who told us that being in contact with our families kept us infantilized, unable to forge an independent life for ourselves. So, like most of my friends, I cut off contact with my family. I finally decided to leave the group after some years and returned to my family, who welcomed me with open arms.

I had my reasons for turning my back on them. I was never cut out for farm life, and in fact the kind of family farm my father and his father and his before him has become unsustainable in my lifetime – so leaving wasn't actually a completely foolish choice. I no longer believed in the fundamentalist religion in which I was raised and I was drawn to the intensity of life in the city rather than the plodding life I left behind. My older brother and I were constantly at odds as we were growing up – as siblings so often are. I remember one time when he really betrayed my trust when I was 6 or 7 and he was maybe 8. We climbed together to the top of the corncrib and dared each other to jump off. Then, without warning, he pushed me off and I sprained my ankle. He was gracious enough to put me in our red wagon and pull me up the hill to the house – and then promptly ran away to escape a spanking. He constantly provoked me – he could get my goat by making fun of my then slightly receding hairline at a very

early age, for which he called me a “ball-peen hammer.” I remember once going after him with a pitchfork. The last time I visited my family in January I asked him if I was threatening him with the handle or the tines – I’d had nightmares about what damage I could have caused with the sharp end. He affirmed that I had indeed attacked him with the tines – but he also reminded me that he was quite skilled at evading me. Still, I feel fortunate that we didn’t have guns in our family – that would have been harder to evade. As it happened, my brother also left the farm and became a pastor in the tradition we grew up in, and I gather that he has not infrequently referred to the conflicts of our youth in a self-critical way in his own preaching, for which I am gratified – and occasionally return the favor.

I have many regrets about the breach in the family I caused by my distance for those years, but especially that I didn’t come home when my beloved grandmother was dying. I had my reasons and the experience was formative for me, but I regret the pain that my choices caused.

On the right side of Rembrandt’s painting, there is another the man standing and looking on. We can imagine that he is the brother, who disapproves of the wastrel who has gone off and dissipated his share of their father’s wealth while he has slaved away on the farm, serving his father faithfully for all those years. We don’t know from the parable whether he ever reconciled with his younger brother or whether he lived out his resentment the rest of his life. Perhaps the story is left open for us to judge – and to consider which course might have been

better for him – or for ourselves when we have perfectly good reasons for resentment and outrage. I am fortunate that my brother chose reconciliation over resentment.

Families are so complicated that it is difficult to know when to continue in relationship and when to break off. Parents can be abusive, children can be self-destructive in ways that require tough love, and siblings can be estranged for good reason. It's almost impossible to judge from outside.

But it behooves us to remember that many conflicts arise because we project some of our own blind spots onto the other, whether relative or friend or enemy. We want to disavow any wrongdoing on our part because we naturally, almost instinctively, find ourselves much less at fault than the other. And here, too, there is an opportunity to learn and grow if we can acknowledge what C. G. Jung refers to as our own shadow side, the part of ourselves we want to deny but that we would be better off acknowledging and befriending. We grow when we can acknowledge our own part in conflicts. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in *The Gulag Archipelago*, says of his time in the concentration camp, “Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either, but right through every human heart, and through all human hearts.”<sup>2</sup> “Through all human hearts,” including our own. And here acknowledging our own imperfection can not only repair broken trust but can also help us become more whole, heal our own frailties.

And then to speak of enemies – and here let me say only what the Buddha said in our responsive reading:

Never does hatred cease by hating in return;

Only through love can hatred come to an end.

Of course, all of these relationships are of a piece. Breaking trust diminishes us while restoring trust enlarges us. In each of these relationships in our lives, conflict is distressing but is also an opportunity to enlarge our hearts and our minds and our capacity to love and live in peace. Let me close with another piece of ancient wisdom, this from the *Tao Te Ching*:

If there is to be peace in the world,

There must be peace in the nations.

If there is to be peace in the nations,

There must be peace in the cities.

If there is to be peace in the cities,

There must be peace between neighbors.

If there is to be peace between neighbors,

There must be peace in the home.

If there is to be peace in the home,

There must be peace in the heart.

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Merritt, “Adversity,” *Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple Pathways for Enriching Your Life*, ed. Scott W. Alexander, Boston: Skinner House Press, 1999, pp. 54-57.

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973), found at <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/RUSsolzhenitsyn.htm>