Sunday, February 12, 1984
ON BEING TRUSTWORTHY
Matthew 5:33-37, 12:33-37

“She was a woman of few words, but you knew immediately that you could trust her. If she said, ‘Yes’ to something, you knew that it would be done.” This was the way a certain individual was described to me not long ago. We all like to meet people like that — those who are trustworthy, people we can count on.

Human honor and the ability to trust the integrity and word of others are critical necessities in the life of a healthy society. Without this basic reality, life itself becomes no longer trustworthy. If we can no longer believe what people tell us, then life falls apart. Falsehood, deceit, cover-ups, broken promises, and outright lies in the private or public arena shatter relationships and tear at the very fabric of society.

Thus, it is no accident that the first word in the Scout law is “trustworthy.” And being “trustworthy” is what Jesus was talking about in the Sermon on the Mount, particularly in the passage read as the Scripture lesson for this morning. Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said by our ancestors, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but shall perform to God what you have sworn.’ But I say to you it should not be necessary for you to take an oath at all. Let what you say be simply ‘yes’ or ‘no'; nothing else should be needed.”

According to the way a legal contract was made in ancient Israel, there was first of all a period of negotiation or bargaining. When an agreement was reached, the two parties would clasp hands and swear in the name of God that they would be true to their word, that they would abide by their contract. Thus, if either party broke their word or violated the contract, if either party did not live up to the oath, that person had taken the name of God in vain. The name of God had been misused.

As the third commandment of the ten commandments put it, “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold the person guiltless who takes God’s name in vain.”

This third commandment is saying: be trustworthy. Keep your word. Live up to your promises. Don’t take an oath to do something and then not do it. Thus, the Hebrews recognized that human honor and the ability to trust the integrity and word of another were critical necessities in the life of a healthy society.

Jesus took the matter one step further. He said it shouldn’t be necessary for you to take an oath; let what you say be simply “yes” or “no.” And then be the kind of persons who do what you say you are going to do.

It shouldn’t be necessary to say, “I swear on a stack of Bibles” or “Scout’s honor” or “Cross my heart and hope to die.” As a Christian, you are to be trustworthy. An oath is not needed.

Jesus lived in a world of complicated swearing and the taking of oaths. If people swore by the temple, it was nothing; but if they swore by the gold of the temple, it was binding; if they swore by the altar, it was nothing; but if they swore by the gift on the altar, it had to be fulfilled. Jesus brushed aside all this casuistry and said, “Do not swear at all; simply say ‘yes’ or ‘no.'” Anything else is unnecessary. Either you are trustworthy or you are not trustworthy.

Let us admit that in our time there is a lot of trustworthiness in our world, and yet at the same time, there is untrustworthiness. The financial markets in this country and in much of the world are built on trustworthiness. Individuals and institutions buy and sell stocks and bonds and other instruments of finance with nothing more than a phone call and a promise to pay or deliver the stock or bonds. Our whole credit system with its charge cards and charge account is built on trustworthiness.

At the same time, the local supermarket has learned it is necessary to get proper identification before accepting a person check, because there are some among us who are not trustworthy.

In the church we find a tremendous amount of trustworthiness, yet also a lack of it. For the most part, for example, people who fill out pledge cards do their best to honor that pledge. But there are others — fortunately, a much smaller number — who simply forget all about what they promised or pledged. I'm sure they wouldn't dare miss a house payment or a car payment or a dinner out, but the church is put off into the future, and, if they are reminded of their obligation, they get upset.

Parents come forward with new babies and have the babies baptized and, in the ceremony, solemnly promise to do their best with the help of the church to bring these children up as Christians, and then some forget all about the promises they have made.

Most of us who have gaps in our trustworthiness do not have these gaps or lapses on purpose. In fact, I think most of us want to be trustworthy, or at least thought of as trustworthy. We have good intentions.

Wherein lies the difficulty? Why do we at times make promises and then not follow through? In his book, The Road Less Traveled, M. Scott Peck points out that to be trustworthy takes a certain amount of self-discipline. We begin to develop self-discipline or the lack of it at an early age, and much of it is learned through imitation in the home. As Peck points out, "It is not that the homes of these unself-disciplined children are lacking in parental discipline of a sort. More often than not these children are punished frequently and severely throughout their childhood — slapped, punched, kicked, beaten, and whipped by their parents for even minor infractions. But this discipline is meaningless. Because it is undisciplined discipline."

Usually, such parents are in their own lives unself-disciplined and, therefore, serve as negative role models for the children. The children soon notice that the parents make promises they don't keep. Or what sense does it make if father beats up mother regularly and then the mother beats one of the children because he has beat up his sister? Does it make sense when he is told that he must learn to control his temper? On the other hand, if a child sees his or her parents day in and day out behaving with self-discipline, restraint, dignity, and a capacity to order their own lives, then the child will come to feel deep within himself that this is the way to live.

If a child sees day in and day out that his or her parents are trustworthy, then it is all the more likely that the child will be trustworthy.

But even more important than role modeling is love. For me to genuinely love someone implies a certain amount of self-discipline on my part. When we love something, it is of value to us, and when something is of value to us, we spend time with it — time enjoying it and time taking care of it. Watch a young person with his car and note the time he will spend admiring it,

polishing it, and taking care of it. Watch an older person with a flower garden or with a lawn, if that is what they love and care for. So, it is when we love children: we spend time admiring them and caring for them. We give them our time. Also, when we love someone, it means that we suffer with them and rejoice with them.

A child will soon pick up the message. “If my parents are willing to suffer with me,” they will tell themselves, “then suffering must not be so bad, and I should be willing to suffer with myself.” This is the beginning of self-discipline.

The time and quality of time that parents devote to their children indicate to them the degree to which they are valued by their parents. Some basically unloving parents, in an attempt to cover up their lack of caring, make frequent professions of love to their children, repetitively and mechanically telling them how much they are valued, but not devoting significant time of high quality to them. Their children are never totally deceived by such hollow words. Consciously they may cling to them, wanting to believe they are loved, but unconsciously they know that their parents’ words do not match up with their deeds. So again, trustworthiness is being taught or not taught by example.

But lest we who are adults try to blame the lapses in our trustworthiness too much on our past, let it be said that no matter what our age, we can change and become more trustworthy. Again, it will require self-discipline.

Too often, especially as we grow older, we seek to avoid the pain of our problems by saying to ourselves, “This problem was caused me by other people or by circumstances beyond my control. It is really not my personal problem.” The extent to which people will go psychologically to avoid assuming responsibility for personal problems, while always sad, is sometimes most ludicrous.

Dr. Peck gives this example: a career sergeant in the army, stationed in Okinawa and in serious trouble because of his excessive drinking, was referred for psychiatric evaluation, and, if possible, assistance. He denied he was an alcoholic, or even that his use of alcohol was a personal problem, by saying, “There’s nothing else to do in the evenings in Okinawa except drink.” Dr. Peck’s conversation with this man went this way:

Dr. Peck asked, “Do you like to read?” “Oh, yes, I like to read, sure,” said the soldier. “Then why can’t you read in the evening instead of drinking?” “It’s too noisy to read in the barracks.” “Well, then, why don’t you go to the library?” “The library is too far away.” “Is the library farther away than the bar you go to?” “Well, I’m not much of a reader. That’s not where my interests lie.” “Do you like to fish?” Dr. Peck asked next. “Sure, I love to fish.” “Why not go fishing instead of drinking?” “Because I have to work all day long.” “Can’t you go fishing at night?” “No, there isn’t any night fishing in Okinawa.” “But there is,” Dr. Peck said. “I know several organizations that fish at night here. Would you like me to put you in touch with them?” “Well, I really don’t like to fish.” “What I hear you saying,” Dr. Peck answered, “is that there are other things to do in Okinawa except drink, but the thing you like to do most in Okinawa is drink.” “Yeah, I guess so,” replied the soldier. “But your drinking is getting you in trouble, so you’re faced with a real problem, aren’t you?” And the soldier replied, “This island would drive anyone to drink.”

How does all this connect with growing more trustworthy? To become more trustworthy begins with self-discipline, which has to be undergirded by self-honesty.

The good news is that, if we are willing to begin this process, that which we Christians call the "love and power of God" is ready and waiting to work with us and in us. This love of God is always wanting to nurture our spiritual growth. It is this love that gives us the strength to be truly trustworthy.

Quaker Christians have long been known for their trustworthiness. In fact, they have even suffered because of it. One afternoon in the year 1662, the people on the streets of London and the shopkeepers from their doorways paused to watch a curious procession of about 30 men with bundles on their shoulders, walking two by two through the main thoroughfares. Evidently, they were men who had suffered, for some of them staggered from weakness, and all of them looked pale and underfed.

The onlookers did not know at first that these men were quakers who had been thrown into Newgate Prison for refusing to swear by oath. "The law requires you to swear that your statements are true," had thundered the officers of the court. To which the Quakers had replied, "Nay, a man's word is as binding as any oath can be, and we do not believe it is right to swear."

So, for months they had been herded in Newgate Prison in conditions so vile that one of their number had finally died. They day before this strange procession made its way through the busy streets of the city, a coroner's jury had appeared to hold an inquest over the death of this member of the group. The members of the jury were so horrified at the conditions they discovered in the prison that they said, "It's a wonder that more of them have not died."

The prisoners had been utterly surprised when the key had turned in the lock the next day and they had seen the blinding light of a torch, the turnkey, and a sheriff. The sheriff announced that he wished he could set them all free, but, as he could not do that, he would do the next best thing for them: he would send some of their number to the old Bridewell Prison and so relieve the crowded condition.

It was then that a very strange thing happened. The porter, who should have escorted them to their prison, announced, "You who are to go to the Bridewell Prison know your way there. Your word is trustworthy; there is no need of my going with you. You may as well go there alone, providing you promise to arrive at the prison before bedtime."

Imagine the surprise of those Quakers as Thomas Elwood and 30 more of them prepared to set out on this unescorted journey from one prison to another. And imagine the surprise of the curious passerby who stopped the little procession to ask the men where they were going and why, and they replied that they were going from one prison to another. "What!" exclaimed the townsman, "without a keeper? Why don't you escape? This is your chance!"

Thomas Elwood raised his head proudly as he replied for all of them, "No, for our word which we have given is our keeper."

How refreshing it is to know and work with people who are trustworthy, people who, when they give their word, make a promise, take a vow, are faithful to that promise. Amen.