TRUST AND OBEY

It does not matter how many church members a church has. What matters is how many of them love Jesus – or if you prefer, how many of them love God and try earnestly to walk the Christian WAY. I think quite a few of us in The New Church would agree that a true church is people who love and follow (try to obey) Jesus. Hopefully we never forget that Jesus loved us first and goes on loving us far more than we love Him.

It is not the purpose of the church to save the world. That is God’s job, and only God knows how; only God understands the timing; only God can coordinate the efforts so that they do more good than harm. Even then, in the larger picture, God does not finally intend to save the world. That’s only an expression we use for God’s purpose of saving us out of and beyond this world. The sun, after all, is cooling off. That life will cease to exist on this planet is a foregone conclusion and a scientific fact. This world is only a temporary waystation. All thoughtful humans have known this for as far back as our records stretch. This is a temporal world. All things get old and eventually die. That is not only true of us, it is also true of our planet.

We have many good and proper purposes and concerns here in this world. Clearly we have trouble finding time and resources and enough energy for most of them. We also live in a dual reality, so we have some priorities in the shadow realm (life on earth), which most of us still think of as the reality realm. We pay attention to survival and to some relatives; most of us want to be good citizens; we have genuine concerns for our country; we are increasingly aware of problems in the whole world. Some of us have hobbies, or we love sports, or we want exercise or travel, or we keep trying to improve our minds (whatever that means). All of it takes time and energy and usually money. Hence we are constantly pruning and prioritizing, or we get ourselves into a total muddle.

The purposes and concerns of the Christian church are many as well, and they must come in the following order of priority. Now, I know many exceptions to this order of priority on the individual level, but this order of priority must be maintained by the church or it will weaken and die:
1.) The personal relationship between God and each individual member of the church is the top and most important priority.

2.) The personal relationship between members is the second most important purpose of the church. That is, we must be a support group for each other and we must be a disciple band of friends, or we will not be able to stay on the Christian Path or WAY for very long.

3.) Inviting others into the faith family and encouraging them to pay primary attention to their own personal relationship with God is the third priority.

4.) Looking for ways to act or respond in the community that are consistent with our faith and our assignments from God is the fourth priority.

5.) Supporting and encouraging sister congregations to keep faithful and joining with them for worship and service is a fifth priority.

And we have many purposes shading down from there, all the way down to painting buildings and replacing roofs. Now, the paint and the roof can sidetrack some congregations, but if the roof exists to enhance our primary purposes, then taking care of it is a holy task. Where does Sunday School fit? In some churches, the children replace God and become the focus of worship. But nurturing our children in the Faith is legitimately part of our second priority. Even that, of course, is done in the hope that our children will discover and take to heart the first priority: their own personal relationship with God. A God who does not come first is not God. That’s a little secret our culture no longer remembers.

What always matters most – what always must come first – is each of us responding to God ourselves, personally. That is where we find our true identity. That is where we discover our true purpose. That is where we get our marching orders as well as the strength and the vision to carry them out. Trust and obey. If we have a God, we throw away our barriers and our defenses and learn to trust God. If we have a God, our first desire, however reticent or confused we sometimes feel, is to find God’s will for our own lives on a daily basis. It is a matter of prayer. And the active verbs are “trust” and “obey.”

To relate to a Being so far superior to ourselves is difficult to comprehend. Some people seem hardly to notice the difference between God’s mental capacities and our own. That often astounds
me. I cannot keep consciously aware of the handful of people I really care about, yet the God I worship keeps aware of several billion people of different cultures, religions, and languages all at the same time! I no longer lose sight of the fact that I have a finite mind. This allows me to skip over many issues and problems that worry and bother other people. But God’s mind is infinite. I cannot comprehend that. Beyond my own finite level of understanding, it does me no good to think about such things. It merely sends my mind into circles of absurdity and meaningless musings.

How then are we to go on trying to relate with and communicate with this God whose capacities are so far beyond our own? An omnipotent, omniscient Being is not someone we hold up our end with. If that ever bothers you, this sermon is preached for you. We will spend today remembering some rock-bottom basics. If we do not trust God or know God’s personal love for us, even these basic principles will do us no good. Assuming, however, that we have awakened in some way to the presence and love of God, these rock-bottom basics move us along on our pilgrimage – our own walk with Jesus – which starts here and now and goes on into eternity. You all know these basics well. Today is only a reminder: the active verbs inside genuine prayer are “trust” and “obey.”

There are always more dimensions to “trust and obey” than we can take in at one time. Doubtless some of you are better at it than I am. Or at least you are better at it in some categories of life than I am. But this is not a contest. Our lives are shaped and blessed by how well we trust and obey God. Sin carries its own punishment along with it. Faithfulness carries its own rewards along with it. So I want to share with you something of my own awareness and understanding of trust and obey and see if it matches any of your own experience.

* * *

Sometimes it gets clearer if we start with what we do know and work from there toward what we are not so sure about. It has occurred to me more than once that God invented children so we could experience life from both sides – both the god side and the child side. We are God’s children, but we are also gods to our children (at least when they are young enough). That can be very instructive. But for me, even that can be confusing at times. Fortunately we can also learn from animals, if we come to love them.
It is called by various names, but today we will call it “Dogology,” which means the study of our relationship with God by noticing the relationship we have as a god to our pets. That is, we can understand our relationship to God better if we understand our relationship to a pet. In my case, Dogology came before theology. To be sure, life is not the same for everyone. Some people never realize that they are a god to their pets. So their pets have no god and do not learn much from them, except that life is a muddle and nothing ever works like it should.

Sorry to drag you into personal history, but it’s hard to get the real flavor of an analogy without a true context. Through most of my growing-up years, people assumed I would end up in a job that had to do with animals. That looked to be my only interest, and many had concluded that it was my only gift. Trying to find some way to connect with something in me, my parents helped me start a Collie Kennel. We sold a Shetland pony colt named Ginger and bought “Golden Sandra of Tamarack.” Sandra was only a few weeks old at the time, but she turned out to be pure angel (messenger from God) through some pretty hard years for me. She was my strongest link with sanity, my strongest link with God, my strongest link with reality. She also raised a lot of pups that sold for quite a bit of money. This went into the college fund. Sandra never failed to take first place in any dog show I entered her in. She was why I ended up as President of the Junior Collie Fanciers of America. Annually we put on the largest single-breed dog show in the country (at Bixby Park in Long Beach, California).

None of this was my doing. A gifted girl named Barbara Taylor had built the organization, and even Sandra was not entirely responsible for her own success. It was all kind of an accident, if you believe in such things. In the first place, we raised goats, and the goat’s milk made Sandra’s coat softer, sleeker, and more beautiful than any normal collie’s coat had a right to be. In the second place, Sandra was always with me, and in those days I was almost always on a horse. My parents were sometimes asked if I had grown there or if I could still get down off my horse if I wanted to. The point being, Sandra was always in incredible condition. She ran with the horses. And that was on top of her bloodlines and the thirty-five champions in her pedigree.

The trophies and blue ribbons were not very important to me. My dog and my horse were important to me. Mostly the shows were a little ritual we kept up to keep people coming to pay good money for the puppies. None of that matters anymore, but it is background for three things that do matter.
1.) **TIME.** Sandra and I spent a lot of time together. We got really close. We loved each other. That was what made everything else possible. Time is necessary to love, and love is necessary to good communication. (You do not have to agree with any of this; I am just telling you what I discovered.)

2.) **OBEDIENCE.** I am not really sure how it happened, but Sandra and I had an understanding about our relationship. I was the Master and she was the servant. Pretty soon neither one of us questioned or tried to change this. If I said it and she could understand it, she did it. Period. End of issue.

Once, late in the evening, I gave Sandra the command to “sit-stay.” The next morning when I came out of my room, she did not greet me at my door in the usual fashion. Of course, I found her where I had left her. I gave her the release sign and she literally dashed to do her business and then back to greet me. (She did lie down during the night, knowing she would hear me in plenty of time to sit again. But she did not leave the spot where she had received a “stay” command. By the time I reached her, she was at the “sit-stay” position again.)

There was no accusation in her eyes, no less love in her greeting. If I wanted her to stay at attention all night, that was my business. Whether I had good reasons or not was none of her concern. Her only concern was to please me. I made tearful vows never to give her a careless command ever again. To my knowledge, I never did. I made mistakes, but they were not careless – not without caring. It is, of course, much harder to be a good god than it is to be a good servant. That’s something many of us have far too little appreciation for.

Anyway, as a result of this bond of love and obedience between us, we could spend even more time together. Sandra could go places most dogs could not go – into the grocery store, into the Whittier public library, into most of the stores in Whittier. It was a small town in those days, and we were well-known. At “heel,” she would shadow me all day, never be in the way, never cause anybody any problem. No leash could have improved her performance. Adults did not need the same rules for us that they needed with others.

We also played endless games together. Some of them Sandra had helped to invent. I never recall trying to teach her to play football, for instance. But the two of us could beat any five kids in the school. Someone had to center the ball to me, and then Sandra and I could
take care of the rest – mostly Sandra. She could run as fast as they could throw, and if they took a step, she would tangle up in their legs and down they would go.

3.) IDENTITY. Sandra had her own aura of confidence and authority. She knew who she was and that she was very special and highly valued. How do I describe it? She was almost never in a fight. When she was, it ended very quickly. Most animals would not challenge her authority, though she never “pushed it.” All the other animals on our place trusted her – cats, horses, goats, chickens, rabbits. She was midwife at all births, babysitter for all young (including human visitors), guardian of the realm. Other dogs who grew up or stayed on our place quickly learned all the rules without my saying a word. She taught them to not cross the boundaries without permission; to not bark without good reason; to not jump on people; to not try to get into the house unless invited. Things it had taken me months to get through to her, she could teach other dogs in a few days.

In short, Sandra’s subservience – her obedience – did not turn her into a cowering, frightened, anxious, nervous being. That is what happens to dogs without any discipline. For Sandra it was quite the opposite. Everywhere she went, people were amazed and impressed by her. At first it started to “turn her head.” “Oohs” and “ahhs” and sounds of friendly approval would break her concentration, and then she would goof. But that was when she had been young, a mere puppy. Dogology can be really accurate and instructive, don’t you think?

Lots of times Sandra was allowed to go pick up approval and affection from admirers, but only when the Master gave permission. That was one of the tougher lessons. Even if another dog tried to interfere or even if other humans were shouting contradictory orders, there was only one voice she would obey. (Unless told to temporarily obey another.) That was a lot to ask. But Sandra learned it. And:

Do not eat from a stranger without permission from the Master. There is danger in the world, and “friendly” is not always true. (There were thieves in our area who would lace hamburger with arsenic and throw it to the dogs before a heist.)

When I was even younger, we lost a wonderful dog on the road (Highway 101). A human had swerved far off onto the shoulder of the highway to kill Brownie with his speeding car. I carried her bleeding body home in my arms, where she died. That was not going to happen
again! So Sandra and I had drills. I am sure none of them ever made any sense to her. But I had seen dogs killed because they were confused or frightened when a car was coming from one direction and their owner was yelling at them from the other. One dog I had seen – when his owner yelled at him to get out of the road – mistook his owner’s fear for anger and cowered down like he had done something wrong ... until the car hit him. Feeling guilty, but too undisciplined to obey, he died. (I wonder how many human tombstones that would fit on? “Feeling guilty, but too undisciplined to obey his Lord, he died.”) Never having known what it could be like between Master and dog – never having experienced the teamsmanship that could be worked out and played out every day – he died. It seemed very sad to me.

You see, the third factor that I am still trying to describe – the reason Sandra was so confident – was that she knew her place and her worth. She knew her identity. She knew she truly pleased her god about ninety-nine percent of the time; she was always working for one hundred percent, but that was her way. It seemed so sad and so unnecessary that this other poor dog and his owner should be stricken by such needless tragedy. In Dogology, this is known as the Second Principle of the Doctrine of Original Ignorance: “No dog is born knowing the Master’s will. All are disobedient and out of touch with the Master’s will until taught.”

Of course, I saw the so-called “accident” with Brownie through my own eyes and measured it by my feelings toward Sandra. I would have been totally bereft. For this other owner, it may have been only a casual grief: “It’s a big world; what’s one more dog?” But I still felt sorry for this dog who had ended up with such a poor, uncaring god. Imagine worshipping a god who cared too little to teach you even simple, basic commands so that in a time of crisis he could not even give the word that would save you. Or that even if a command were given, you would still be too confused, frightened, disobedient, or guilty to move in time.

Because of my own bad memories, every week or two Sandra and I would go through the emergency drills. Even then I tried to make sure we did not get into situations where we would need them. Sandra must have thought they were the dumbest games we ever played and wondered why we played them so often. I do not know if they ever saved her life. On the occasions when a potentially dangerous situation developed, we were out of there long before it got scary.
Sometimes when my God asks me to do things over and over that do not make a lot of sense to me—like pray every morning whether I feel like it or not, even though we are going to spend the rest of the day together—I wonder if maybe my God has some concerns that I do not know about. Maybe that’s the drill: preparation for the speeding car that I do not know is coming. I also remember that Sandra got less mercy on drill instructions than on any other type of command. Those had to be perfect, instantaneous, and right every time. And those were the very commands that probably made no sense to her at all.

It’s uncanny, this canine theology. Does your God teach you some of the drills (besides the reporting-in every morning)?

a.) Be honest, with yourself and others, all the way and every time.
b.) Give value for value, even if nobody else does, and even if nobody else seems to care or notice.
c.) If you are wrong, admit it, say you are sorry, and try to make amends.

Things like that do not make any sense in our kind of world. They are not very relevant to the larger issues that face and threaten us. They seem old-fashioned in most settings today, and from our perspective they even make us feel awkward in many situations. Yet we get in trouble with God more and faster over items like these than we do over many things that seem important and make more sense to us. It must be the drill! That means if we get really good at the drill, we may never see the dangers we are being saved from.

*          *          *

Back to Sandra. Eventually I went to high school. They made me take a class in biology. In that class, they tried to teach me some of the facts about animal anatomy. Among other things, they covered the size of the brain in various animals, including the dog. And they compared the intelligence capacity of these animals with that of an average human being. Other students in the class acted pretty ho-hum about what they were teaching, but I was staggered.

There were not many humans in the world at that time whom I would have compared favorably to any animal—never mind to Sandra or to my horse Becky. (The highest compliment I ever gave Mariana was that she reminded me of my horse. Mariana is a city girl and still
has no real comprehension of how infatuated I must have been to give her such a compliment. But Becky is another story, and we will not get into that today.) Yet here was this biology teacher telling me that the least intelligent of all the humans around me were a lot smarter than the smartest dog could possibly be – and not just by a little, but many times over. You think you have lived through a faith crisis? That was not my first or only faith crisis, but it registers with the best of them. I had no choice but to conclude that intelligence was not one of the more important factors in life. That may have been hasty; I eventually learned that intelligence has to be in the picture somewhere. But that’s not the issue at the moment.

I hope you are still with me. We said we were going to try to get simple and keep touching base with the basics. Like most of you, I did not grow up fast or easy. In my case, I survived my younger years by living in my own private world. I lived with animals as much as possible; for the rest, I just went through the motions to survive. That is oversimplified, but it will have to do. I tried to start living in the real world in about the seventh grade. By my sophomore year in high school, it was still a major struggle. I was trying to wake up to and catch up to the real world, and now the real world was trying to tell me that the only things I really knew and cared about were not worth very much: God, and the animals.

That did not make sense to me because relationship, sharing, love, teamsmanship, and caring had mostly been between me and animals and between me and God. I communicated better with animals than with humans; I trusted animals a lot more than I trusted most humans. I tried to take care of my horse and my dog, but they had both saved my life many times. It was not always easy to get on the inside with an animal, but once you did, you were there and they would never betray you. That was not true of a lot of humans.

If you offered Sandra meat, money, a better house, or a brighter future to betray me, she would have ignored you. If you pushed it, she would have bitten your head off. In my case, I had not often found that kind of integrity with humans. Some with a few. A lot with my father. But he was even harder to get inside with than the animals.

And now I was being told that the animals had none of these capacities; that they could not be conscious of any of the things I had experienced with them; that they were not intelligent enough or advanced enough to have any connection with God; that I had projected all of this stuff onto them.
I was trying to learn, mostly because God had said I had to. But nobody told me that this biology teacher knew a lot about biology but a whole lot less about God and the animals than I did. So I got confused. Then I got quietly angry way down deep inside. And I started learning in earnest. A very big, outside world was telling me some strange lies, and I wanted to know why. It turned out that they believed the lies themselves, so they did not mean to lie. But that does not mean the lies do any less damage.

I loved Sandra with all my heart. And it seemed to me that she loved me back, and that often her heart was bigger than mine. Eventually I got to behavioral psychology (B.F. Skinner) and discovered that organisms merely do what helps them survive: I was a lonely little boy who liked to have my face licked, so I responded in a way that encouraged what I took to be affection. Meanwhile, Sandra needed food and safety for herself and her pups, so she continued to behave in a way that would ensure that I would continue to provide for her needs.

I spent years wading through texts and books and classes and theories. And I gave it a good shot. I tried to imagine Sandra knowing by instinct that my life was more important than hers and so she risked her life to save me from that rattlesnake so that I would go on feeding and caring for her and her puppies.

And the time Tony (that’s a horse) kicked me (and laid me up for three months), and Becky lit into him and kicked the stuffings out of him for a full quarter of a mile down the road. And after he was going as fast as he could and not likely to stop, she was back at my side instantly, nuzzling me to see how I was. And she would not stop until I was lying across her back so she could carry me home. But it was only because her feeble brain realized that if she did not save me, I might not bring her hay or oats in the morning? Does B.F. Skinner have such a big name that nobody else recognizes bullshit when they hear it?

So I finally figured out that it was too bad a lot of very intelligent people did not have a horse or a dog to grow up with, and that they did not know that the soul exists in some animals as well as in some humans, whether any of their machines can measure it or not.

It did leave me with one big question, however. How could Sandra fake so much intelligence? Love and soul could explain a lot, but she seemed to reason almost on my level. She got so she knew
what I wanted or needed before I did. Over and over she made choices as if she had a brain like mine and as if our minds were in tune.

I think it must have been the obedience thing. The desire to please me seemed to grow. She would learn by repetition. Once the pattern was clear, she could add to the pattern “by feel,” it seemed. Over time, she learned my patterns until she seemed to “think” as I did and “feel” as I did. So she lived on a plane a lot higher than she was capable of because her only focus, with whatever capacity and soul she had, was to please and obey me.

Sandra did not have to reason; she only had to obey. She did not have to understand; she only had to please – by following as much as she could remember of the patterns that brought my approval. So she appeared to be thinking and in tune with my mind, almost on my mind’s level.

Of course, my dream is that one day I will be toward my God the way Sandra was toward me. And though my intelligence in comparison to my God is far below what Sandra’s intelligence was in comparison to me, she taught me that intelligence is not the only hope. If I obey God the way Sandra obeyed me, I can eventually learn patterns, live on a level far beyond my native capacities, and even be in tune with a will that is far beyond my understanding.

In Dogology, we discovered three things:

1.) The relationship requires that Master and dog spend a great deal of TIME together.

2.) The roles in the relationship must be absolutely clear: I was the Master, Sandra the servant. If I spoke it and she could understand it, she would do it. OBEDIENCE.

3.) The more Sandra pleased me, the more confident and happy and sure of her worth she became. Through obedience, not self-will, she learned her worth and her true IDENTITY.

In Christian theology, we discover exactly the same three things.