My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God of our Eastertide Resurrection, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

Before we get started today, I want to remind us that Luke and Acts are written as a single commentary. The Gospel records what Jesus began to do and teach. Acts describes what Jesus continued to do and teach through the Holy Spirit. Acts records the expansion of the early church with historical accounts, and we begin to see the Holy Spirit’s centrality of purpose in those events not only in the lives of the people involved, but for our lives as well.

So our text today is one of contrasts. Saul is not a nice person at all. But he has what we might call today one of those conversion moments where, with the help of a Christian names Ananias, he repents his violent ways and, as the text says, “got up, was baptized, ate some food, and regained his strength”. Which sound a lot like what one might do after listening to John the Baptist said as Christ’s baptism, right? What was that? “The time has come. The Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the Good News”. Paul turned around, washed his old life away, ate the bread of life, and believed.

All’s well that ends well, right?

Well, Ananias took a leap of faith here over Paul by helping someone who was, by reputation, a bad dude, one who really didn’t engender trust. That should make us think, too.

What do we do in these circumstances? How do we forgive someone, and then engage of restoration of trust? The sign out front of our church says, “Practice forgiveness”. But we’ve all been burned by folks who say they’re sorry but not really, some worse than others, right? It’s not easy to always put into words what was unhealthy about those times, but it sure raises the hairs up on the back of our necks, doesn’t it?

I think we all struggle with discerning disingenuous repentance, and we can all witness a conversation but come away with different impressions—genuine sorrow versus sorrow for being caught versus crocodile tears to gain emotional leverage over other persons or situations.

Manipulation is about why something is done, not just what was done, such as resisting change, minimizing responsibility, blame-shifting. And it doesn’t require an awareness of what is happening in the moment. Ones who manipulate just want to escape discomfort, but they frame questions and words in such a way that it makes others seems selfish, mean or unreasonable. How many of us have been there, on the receiving end of it?

How many of us have been there, dishing it out?

Not quite as many nods. Let’s go through some phrases which might remind us of our experiences. Some of these phrases might trigger the manipulative impulse in us, as in we’ve used them ourselves. Or they’ve been used on us while others try to manipulate.

* “I know I’m not perfect”. What this says is that we should feel bad for being judgmental and harsh, and excited about the possibility of restoring trust. Mmmhmmm.
* “I’ve never pretended to be someone I’m not”. This one confuses genuineness with righteousness; a person could be hurtful all the time, but we’re to blame if we decide to end the relationship since we chose to be in relationship with them to begin with.
* “You’re bringing up stuff from the past”. Folks who say this don’t want to see patterns about behavior that is harmful or event that are hurtful. As if every event is the first time stuff has ever happened.
* “You know I’m not the kind of person who would do that…that’s not what I meant.” This time the person who seeks repentance is in charge of defining the event for which forgiveness is being sought. So the offended person cannot describe their pain. Oh kay…
* “Well, I said I was sorry. What more do you want from me?” Here they imply that if anything more than words are required in response to hurtful actions, then we are being unforgiving and mean, and their apology should be met with immediate restoration of trust and equanimity.

What do we think? Do these sound familiar, both in coming from our mouths and also having heard them being used on us? How do we know when someone has hurt us so badly, so deeply, so often, that they are just using manipulative repentance as a way to continue to persecute our souls and life for their own means?

What was Ananias’ response? Well, okay, if I had heard the Lord speaking to me in no uncertain terms maybe I’d have punted on my suspicions too. But I don’t think most of us have that luxury. What do we do when confronted in this way?

It really depends on whether our prior relationship with the person is safe, doesn’t it? If a friend starts to do this, we call them out on it, and listen to whether they can see themselves. This may take a few minutes of back and forth, right? We don’t always have our best selves on display at all times. We may need a minute to swallow our pride and admit we’re trying to game the system or relationship. Or we may need to gently remind the other person that we just need them to not act in a way we don’t recognize.

This is not a new problem. Let’s be honest: there isn’t one of us here today that hasn’t said these things. And throughout our Bible, even the best of souls said this stuff, even the most celebrated saints used these phrases that made others do their bidding.

So how do we respond to repentance? To whom do we turn for strength and purpose? Most importantly, which of these phrases do we use most, and what are we going to do about it?

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

Most folks want genuine relationships and to know what we think and feel is real. That means that we take ownership of pain we cause, apologize for it, ask how we can make amends, and try and repair the relationship through better actions in the future.

Better ACTIONS. Not words. It’s interesting to me that our Bible calls out the ACTS of the Apostles. We’re human. We will constantly say stupid things. But it’s the follow-up, the future of those words and apologies that defines our life, both individually and together. And how we believe our own and others’ misconceptions will have great impact on how we build our church in the future.

God is not about manipulation. Love is not about being dishonest to those we love, and as Christians, that means everyone we encounter, because we love our neighbors as ourselves, right? Maybe the answer to all of our quandaries here is the realization that as disciples, we will feel discomfort at the hands of others. Bad stuff may happen to us because of their actions. But we promise to love. Why? Because God loved us first.

And that love never manipulates, and always lets us back into grace. Let us go and do likewise.

Thanks be to God, Amen.