

“ Who’s your #1 ? ”
Series: Mend Week 6
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For the past month in our Mend sermon series, we’ve looked at our relationships with others and how God guides us in tending and mending those relationships. Pastor Doug reminded us Mend begins with Me – to begin the process of repairing relationships we need to start with what we can control -- our own actions.

We then looked at the role of listening. There’s a youtube video that’s been going around for a bit – A mom tells her little boy he cannot have the cupcake he wants. He VERY earnestly and repeatedly says, “Listen Linda listen” as he tries to justify why he SHOULD have that cupcake and how he can have lots of cupcakes at grandma’s house. He clearly has not yet learned the lesson that moms will not be worn down by arguing! I often hear that soundtrack play over and over again reminding me to stop and “Listen Linda Listen” before jumping in to speak or offer unwanted advice or point out how the other person is wrong.

Scott reminded us that we must ensure our relationship foundations are strong – built on speaking the truth, even if it's hard or inconvenient. “Instead we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church.” Ephesians 4:15

For the past two weeks, we’ve looked at boundaries in relationships – a topic that’s resonated with many of us. Romans 12:18 tells us “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” I love how God gives us appropriate boundaries – as far as it depends on you. That’s all we can control! Establishing boundaries helps our relationships as well as ourselves.

My husband Warren and I are about to enter uncharted relationship territory, this fall we will become first-time grandparents – Dan and Liz are expecting a baby boy in October. From what literally EVERYONE has said to me – THIS will be a relationship like no other. “You will LOVE being a grandparent.” There is “NOTHING better than seeing your children with their children.”

Thankfully there is one very important, built-in boundary – grandchildren are not OUR children! We know Dan and Liz will make wonderful parents. We can have all the fun and joy and give them BACK when they (or we!) get tired and cranky.

Joking aside, what I truly see as our role in this relationship – is to simply give this little boy all the love and support we can offer AND to let him know that he is loved beyond belief by not only his entire family but by the creator of the universe, his heavenly father. And there is nothing in the world he can ever do to change how God loves him unconditionally.

Think about that for a minute. The God of the universe – – who makes the seas roar and the mountains soar – who breathes life into every living thing – cares about every one of us – about you and you and you and you and me and that little grandbaby to be.

He cares so much for us, we are so important to him, that he sent his only son – part of himself – to take on all our sins, wipe the slate clean, and restore our relationship with him once and for all.

Jesus came down to earth not just so he could save and redeem us, but so he could give us all a beautiful revelation of who our Father is. In part of his longest prayer ever recorded, Jesus says to his father, “Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent... I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.” John 17: 3, 26.

Our God is not a distant God, guiding us from “up high.” Our God longs to be known by us – to be in relationship with us. God wants us to be filled with his love and presence. Pastor Doug talked last week about how we often carry around empty cups looking to people and things to fill us up, only to find ourselves coming up short every time. Why do we keep trying to earn love rather than live in response to the love we’ve already been given?

Only the presence and power of God can truly fill us up. Our relationship with our heavenly father is the anchor for our souls - how we feel about ourselves, as well as our relationships with others. God offers the gift of his love and forgiveness freely. The key here is offers. God will never force himself on anyone. His love is a gift freely given – all we have to do is accept it. So why is that so hard for us?

For one thing, I think we don't really get, really understand God's love. Love is such a funny word – we use it so freely - Man I really love how Tom and Mark and their awesome team make us such yummy food on Sunday mornings. It makes me want to get out of bed on Sunday mornings! Oh, I love your new haircut; you look great! Come on Brian, you gotta LOVE the way my Eagles are playing.... I love love love this boy or that girl; until NEXT month when I love love love someone new.

As I searched the bible for insight into God's love, I realized that God is not at all the kind of love how we humans define or understand love. Divine love is unfathomable and infinite. Way more than just a verb describing our feelings, way more than even deep affection or profound devotion. The Hebrew word "hesed" is often used when referring to God's love. It's hard to translate into any language because it combines the ideas of love, generosity, and enduring commitment all into one. Affection goes away after a time. Even earthly commitments go away. God's commitment lasts a lifetime and beyond. There is no English word, we have no human comparison for God's love.

So what do we do to try to wrap our heads around this? We try ascribing earthly attributes, what we've experienced in our own relationships, to our relationships with God.

Ever feel judged in a relationship? Like you're not quite "good enough?" Or only loved when you succeed – bring home the great report card, deliver a killer presentation to win the deal, look a certain way? When we experience judgment in our relationships we may think God's love wavers with our performance. That he is constantly judging us; seeing if we measure up. Nope, God loves us unabashedly, unconditionally just as we are. "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were EVEN (emphasis mine) still sinners, Christ died for us." Romans 5:8.

TRUST

Maybe you have relationships where you never felt secure, where the other person was not reliable. Where you were always wondering if this was the time they would leave and you'd be left to handle things on your own. Not God. "The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid. Do not be discouraged." Deuteronomy 3:18. God goes before us and stays with us, through thick and thin.. ALWAYS.

Or maybe you've really messed up in a relationship or in life and feel like God couldn't possibly still love you – that he's turned his back on you and you deserve it. One of my favorite bible stories is the Prodigal Son found in Luke. The son rejects his father by demanding his inheritance even though his father is very much still alive, takes off and “squanders his money on wild living,” and then returns home when he's run out of money and options, hoping he will be accepted as one of his father's servants.

Not this father – while the son is still a long way off, this father runs out to meet his prodigal with open, loving arms. This father then affirms his love and acceptance by covering him with his own robe and throwing a celebratory feast with his friends and neighbors. That's the love our God has for us when we mess up. He waits with open arms whenever we decide to come home. And celebrates every single time.

God's role in our relationship is clearly like NO other relationship we have because –after all, he's God! We can however use some of the same practices we've been discussing this past month to grow our relationship with our heavenly father.

If we want to mend or grow or even begin our relationship with God, remember what we talked about in the first week of this series, it begins with us – it begins with me. God is constant. His love never changes. He is always with us - we just need to spend time with him. To grow our relationship with God, we need to prioritize it. Jesus models this for us – “Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed.” Mark 1:35. The point is here that Jesus prioritized prayer – not that everyone needs to get up super early to do so!

Maybe you've been a prayer warrior for years. Or maybe you've never really established a good habit of prayer. Or maybe you have no idea where to even start. Next week we'll begin a Message series on Prayer called “Enter the Center.” To help prepare our hearts, we'll begin the study with a 24 Hour Prayer Anywhere vigil starting Saturday, August 5th. We hope everyone will sign up for an hour of prayer. Pray anywhere – at home, work, in the park, at the beach – wherever you are. In your bulletin, you'll find suggestions for prayer and the sign-up link. Let's cover our church and our community with the powerful prayers of our Woodside family.

To grow our relationship with God, we need to make space to hear.

When I first started my quiet time with God, it was pretty one-way. I'd journal the things I was thankful for and read a short devotional which typically concluded with a short prayer. Check! What I was missing was time to quiet my mind and LISTEN to what God was saying, how God was directing me. Listen Linda Listen... there's that little boy's voice again.

I've never heard God audibly speak. But when I give him time and space to communicate with me, he does. Sometimes someone pops into my head and I feel prompted to reach out. When I do, the person almost always says "How did you know I needed that right now?" God speaks to me through scripture – often I will read the passage for my devotion and it's EXACTLY what I needed to hear that day.

Here's something really cool about the bible. The Bible is not just static words in a book. The Word of God is alive and speaks to us all personally. How? In preparing them for the time ahead when he will no longer be physically with them, Jesus says to his disciples, "The Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." John 14:26. God did not leave us alone; he gave us the gift of the Holy Spirit to guide us always.

Let me let you in on a secret – I sometimes get a little stressed when I'm writing my sermon messages. And it tends to come together at the 11th hour, which makes it a little too stressful for the Sermon Writing and Worship teams. Three weeks ago, I sat down for my morning God time and actually took the time to silence my phone and quiet my mind. I knew I was scheduled to give the final message in our relationship series at the end of the month. I literally wrote in my journal – please help me write this message w/o the usual stress. And I filled eight pages with God's ideas. Not a word was spoken, but the Holy Spirit sure filled my mind with God's thoughts. I knew He wanted me to talk about our most important relationship - our relationship with him.

In building our relationship, we also need to accept God's Mercy

An obstacle in our relationship with God can be unconfessed sin. Maybe there's a habit in your life that you know is not good for you. Or you've done something wrong; made a bad decision. But instead of getting it off your chest, confessing to God and stopping the behavior, or righting the wrong, you find excuses why you

can't fit in quiet time, maybe skip your growth group, don't make time for Worship, drown in sorrow and shame. Try to hide from God.

Here's the thing – we can't hide from God. Remember Adam and Eve? They had a beautiful relationship with God, walking and talking with him daily in the Garden of Eden. But they succumbed to sin – did the one thing God asked them not to do – and ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And they were immediately ashamed and hid from God. But God already knew their sin! He wasn't surprised. Yes, their actions had consequences. But God also responds with amazing mercy: he wraps them in animal cloths to cover their shame and foreshadow the righteousness of Christ God wraps around all of us. His mercy is always available to us. I love this reminder in Lamentations: “Your mercies are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.” Lamentations 3:23

God at the Center

Sometimes “things” can get in the way of our relationship with God. our phones, social media, TV, gaming, sports, friends, activities, work. None of these are inherently bad things. Nor does God say we need to remove them from our lives. It's when they take over our lives; consume us.

Ever hear that question – who's your #1 – who's the person you go to FIRST? God wants us to go to HIM first – to put God at the center of our life; the center in our relationship with our spouses, our kids, our families - everyone we encounter. God at the center as we work, go to school, participate in sports, music, dance, activities. As we breathe.

You may know a young man named Ryan McCarty. He worships here often when he is in town; part of the Young Guys GG that Pastor Doug leads. *Please don't tell Pastor Doug he may have aged out of that group.* Ryan has not been here much lately as, in a story only God could write, he was signed last summer to play baseball for the Toronto Blue Jays and is currently playing for their High A team in Vancouver.

In an article for the Canadian Baseball Network, Ryan says he is playing for his three most meaningful things: Christ, his family, and to win. “I think playing in Christ ultimately starts with remembering that he died for our sins,” McCarty says. “I think the love of Christ can change a lot of people's lives and how they feel on a daily basis. It really puts into perspective what you can do with your life and how

special it is. I'm doing it to represent him and to spread the message of how much love there is and what God's done in my life." Wise words from a "young guy."

God longs to be known by you and you and you and me. He longs for us to make time to simply seek his face and get to know his personality, his unconditional, amazing love, and the availability of his presence. To make him our #1 in how we love, how we serve and how we share.

Will you join me in a word of prayer? In the words of the apostle Paul in his prayer in Ephesians, "I pray that from God's glorious, unlimited resources he will give you mighty inner strength through the Holy Spirit. And I pray that Christ will be more and more in your hearts as you trust in him. May your roots go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high and how deep the love of Christ is.

Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever. Amen!