

RELATIONSHIPS

I'm going to start today with a little math refresher. I know most of you will groan, but I can count on Adah being interested. She probably knows more math now than I did when I finished my post-graduate course in advanced algebra. In division we have a **numerator** (#) (That is not a hash-tag, it's an octothorpe which is commonly called a number sign) which represents how many of something you have and a **denominator** which denotes into how many parts you are going to divide those somethings. Now if the denominator is zero or nothing, then the numerator is an infinite number of those nothings. In other words, anything divided by nothing is infinity. Take my word for it, it's undefined that way, but we'll use that later on in the program, as they say.

$$\frac{\#}{0} = \infty \text{ (infinity)}$$

Our real subject is **Relationships** or **learning how to love**. We are born with the innate ability to love, in the sense of desire or craving. In other words, the self-sustaining or self-gratifying attraction to things that please us. God honoring love, which is probably the subject the most often mentioned in the New Testament is both difficult to understand and to attain. I'm going to try to address that love as necessary to good relationships.

There are many types of relationships. Some good, some so-so, some not-so-good. All are connected (that is, tied together) by something. The strength of any inter-personal relationship is, of course, the degree and mutuality of the binding love. As our hymn says:

Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love.

Other relationships include, for example:

You have a financial relationship with your lending institute

The tie is the mortgage.

You have a club relationship with your lodge.

The tie is the membership.

You have a work relationship with your company.

The tie is the contract.

You have a relationship with your cat.

The tie is ownership. (You know which way!)

You have a personal relationship with your spouse.

The tie is mutual love.

Today, I'm going to get personal. What I mean is, I'm going to speak from personal experience. Quite often when we meet new people, they ask Margaret and me how long we have been married. Recently, someone asked and I said, "I

have had 60 wonderful years." Margaret said, "Honey, we just celebrated our 61st anniversary." So I said, "60 out of 61 ain't bad, huh!"

When Margaret heard Robin give me the date, she asked me what I'm preaching on. I told her relationships. She looked quizzically at me, so I clarified by saying, "love." She replied, "Good, you can never say too much about love." With my wife's blessing, here we go.

Jesus put it as a way of recognizing His disciples, making it, shall we say, mandatory?

(John 13:34-35) **"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."** (NIV)

II John 1:6 **And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love.** (NIV)

Now, if love is so important, maybe we need to learn more about what it is. Unfortunately, we use one word to mean so many different things. As Pastor Robin pointed out a few weeks ago, mostly we use it in a self serving way. Although we desire to know what a truly God honoring love is, it is just too elusive. So, even though I know fools go in where angels fear to tread, I'll play the fool and try one more time to identify it. As you know, I am a gov'mint retiree, so I must like acrostics. Here goes: (M is for the many things she gave me, O means only that she's growing old ... Put them all together) Yeah, you know what an acrostic is. I will mostly be speaking of a two person relationship, such as in marriage, but everything I say can also be applied to any personal relationship. Based on my years of experience and research, I have enough for a series of four sermons, but I'll try to squeeze it into an hour and a half. Just stick with me.

First, and maybe foremost, for L, let's chose L~~e~~t.

In our relationship, Margaret lets me do the things I like to do, such as: play ball - softball, basketball, volleyball. To be reciprocal, I let her do what she likes: cook all the meals, clean the house, wash the clothes... What?? Just ask her!

God set the perfect example of this from the beginning. When He made that first couple, He let them do whatever they wanted, eat anything in the garden, with a slight caveat!

Genesis 1:27-29 **So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.**

28 God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

29 Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food." (NIV)

So, what was the caveat? According to Eve at Gen 3:2, she quoted Him as saying: "You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die." Now here's the example: if you truly let someone be free, love demands that you include any warning of danger. It can't just be total indulgence. The opposite of love is not hate, it's to ignore, disrespect, or disregard, paying no attention to. Sometimes to fully understand something, we must get to know its opposite.

Now the opposite of letting is controlling. It is so easy to give in to that inner need to control and never realize it. I often get amused when I step back to let someone precede me out a door and they unconsciously reach over and turn the light off as they exit, leaving me in the dark. It may be a subtle need by that person to control the situation. We all know people who, without recognizing it, need to control the finances, the atmosphere, or even the conversation. The tricky part is to know how and when to freely let, and when control is needed. Sometimes our need to put someone on a leash is misinterpreted by others.

Two examples come to my mind. According to polls, there has been a recent 6% growth in the number who say they are no longer affiliated with any religious group or even belief in God. When asked why, many interviewees attribute it to Christian upbringing where the parents don't live what they profess, but try to dictate or even pass laws to control or force others to accept the Christian lifestyle. Thus, a case of attempting too much control. The second has to do with the Second Amendment. Many of us believe in letting citizens own firearms, but judging by the too often mass shootings, this is obviously a case where there's a need for some controls. I believe that trying to emulate God we should probably in most cases err on the side of letting the ones we love learn by trial and error. To let shows trust and confidence which strengthen a relationship. We must let the other person learn to be themselves and to continue to be that person. The attempt to control can be one of the most destructive elements in a relationship.

When we did seminars on Covenant Marriage, we discussed the many times the drastic mistake was made of marrying someone for who they are, then trying to mold them into what we really want.

Paul put letting in the attitude of submitting.

Ephesians 5:21-22, 25 **Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.**

22 Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord.

25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her (NIV)

To sum it up, this aspect of love is to

"Let the ones you love be themselves."

Next comes O. No, we don't take the O from the song I mutilated earlier, because love never grows "old." Rather, it denotes other.

So: L et

O *ther*

V

E

The starting point for this can be taken from Jesus:

Luke 6:31: **Do to others as you would have them do to you.** (NIV)

We call that, as the Pope told our Congress, the Golden Rule. It is so simple. When we are about to interact with others, just think, how would I like to be treated, and do that. Or, is it simple? On the table back there, there is a book titled, "Five Love Languages" by Gary Chapman. Different people respond to or like to be treated in different ways. When I am sad or mourning, I am not so much comforted by someone massaging my shoulders, for instance. Some people are. If a man at work hears of a female co-worker who just lost a family member, comes up to her, strokes her arm and puts his arms around her when she is not a person whose love language is touching, he might have a sexual harassment case on his hands, even if he would prefer that approach when he is grieving. So we have to consider the Rule on a second level. That is, how we want to be treated is for the other person to know us well enough to know our love language, so we must approach them in that light, knowing enough about them to use the right language. I recommend you get a copy of the book, especially for help in marriage.

In order to keep a relationship fresh and positive, a culture of appreciation should exist. We must recognize and express our admiration for the things we like in the other person. The opposite of showing appreciation is criticism. Nothing can destroy a relationship faster than unsolicited, unwarranted criticism. It has been said, "To divorce-proof your marriage, learn to appreciate."

As I mentioned earlier, when we say, "I love (something)," we generally are referring to how much it pleases us. However, to love somebody should be a commitment to give rather than get.

To truly love someone, we must think more of them and less of self. The old Amish saying put it well:

"Only one life, 'twill soon be past,
Only what's done for others will last."

And my favorite scripture on this point shows that Christ is in there:

Matthew 25:37-40 **"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?**

38 When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you?

39 When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

40 "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' (NIV)

We interpret this to mean Jesus was referring to the King as Himself, and in brothers we see others. Along this line, there are many examples given in the New Testament which are known as the "one another" passages. Let's look at some:

Romans 12:10 **Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.** (NIV)

Romans 12:16 **Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.** [i.e., wrapped up in your own self] (NIV)

Romans 15:7 **Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God.** (NIV)

Romans 16:16 **Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send greetings.** (NIV)

1 Corinthians 1:10 **I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.** (NIV)

Ephesians 4:2 **Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.** (NIV)

And, of course, Paul didn't forget the criticism side:

Romans 14:13 **Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way.** (NIV)

And there were a half dozen more examples I've omitted besides some I'll use later, but we must move on. To summarize here:

I Corinthians 10:24 **Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others.** (NIV)

For V it has been suggested that we value the other person. My fault with this is that we value something by its worth to us, so it falls into the self centered use of love. I choose, instead: volunteer.

L et
O ther
V olunteer
E

Yes, I went to a military school and spent nearly 4 years in the Air Force, so I know the warnings about never volunteer. But this is a different situation. My wife is a self-conscious introvert. She has taught me that those big surprise party things normally are enjoyed by everyone except the one being surprised. (There are the exceptions of those extroverts who are thrilled by the big surprises.) On the other hand, what I'm suggesting is that the other person is almost always surprised and pleased when we volunteer to do the small unexpected things. Like take out the trash without being asked.

Paul put it:

Galatians 5:13 **You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.** (NIV)

That's great, and I'm suggesting the service or deed be something that you anticipate and do without being asked. Remember, we do not have to ask Jesus to be a sacrifice for us, He volunteered, we just accept it.

Ephesians 5:2 ... **and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.** (NIV)

The value of volunteering is that it can be accepted as a gift, not a purchase.

Finally we come to E.

Trying to find the right word, I went to the dictionary. Do you know how many words start with e?

In the book of Acts, when the Church began to flourish, we find a man named Saul.

Acts 8:3 **But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.** (NIV)

One day he was headed for Damascus to continue this when a light so bright:

Acts 9:4-6 **He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"**

5 "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied.

6 "Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do."
(NIV)

In Damascus he was befriended by Ananias and joined the Christians. Then he decided to return to Jerusalem.

Acts 9:26-27 **When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were all afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple.**

27 But Barnabas took him and brought him to the apostles. He told them how Saul on his journey had seen the Lord and that the Lord had spoken to him, and how in Damascus he had preached fearlessly in the name of Jesus. (NIV)

The name Barnabas in our language would be: "son of encouragement." So for E, I choose:

L et

O ther

V olunteer

E *ncourage*

Later at Antioch, the two of them were commissioned as the first Christian Missionaries. With encouragement from Barnabas, beside his mission work, Paul (the same as Saul) wrote nearly half of our New Testament. Including:

1 Thessalonians 5:11 **Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.** (NIV)

Paul could have taken his own advice. When He and Barnabas decided to make a second missionary trip, he refused to take John Mark, Barnabas' nephew, because John had gone home half-way through the first journey. So, the "Encourager" took John Mark, and his consideration may well be the reason we have the first Gospel written (Mark) from which Matthew and Luke copied extensively. I personally have a strong belief that Barnabas' encouragement didn't stop there but maybe he also was the author of the book of Hebrews, from which we get:

Hebrews 10:25 **Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-- and all the more as you see the Day approaching.** (NIV)

One of the most effective means for encouraging is affirmation, my primary love language as I spoke of earlier. Without the feedback of approval, it is easy to become discouraged because your work can begin to seem useless. On the

other hand, simple statements or expressions of affirmation is like adding fuel to the fire. All my life I have had a need to please. The measure of how well I'm doing is read in the feedback of affirmation. The opposite of encourage is discourage. We all know the destruction of discouraging someone. Encouraged and discouraged, like love, are subconscious states or feelings. In a course on caregiving a couple of years ago I learned something that is applicable in all relationships.

Though people may forget what you say to them, they never forget how you *make them feel*.

On August 1, this year, our grand-daughter, Rachel, got married and had the reception in a cafeteria on the UMBC campus where her husband works. They had tables for eight covered with plain paper and a container of colored felt tip markers. The directions were for those at the tables to draw, write, or somehow convey a message for the couple. After I had tried to write some platitudes, it struck me to give them what I called "Grand-daddy's Rule." If they have **love** for each other as a basis for their marriage, and they let **nothing** (ϕ) divide that love, then it will last for **infinity**.

Grand-daddy's Rule

$$\frac{\text{LOVE}}{\text{NOTHING}} = \infty \text{ (infinity alt 236)}$$

God modeled this with:

John 3:16 **"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (NIV)**

Let me paraphrase that:

God loved us so much, that if we love Him in return, and we let nothing divide that love, we will last forever.