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Salina Mennonite Church
May 26, 2019
Scripture: 1 John 3:11-24

Getting to the Heart of It All

We've arrived at the last topic in a series based on a resource titled *Stewards of Grace*.¹ We've looked at the topics of time, talents, money, health, and creation. Today we consider relationships.

From 1 John 3: *We know what true love looks like because of Jesus. He gave His life for us, and He calls us to give our lives for our brothers and sisters.*

If a person owns the kinds of things we need to make it in the world but refuses to share with those in need, is it even possible that God's love lives in him? My little children, don't just talk about love as an idea or a theory. Make it your true way of life, and live in the pattern of gracious love.

*There is a sure way for us to know that we belong to the truth. Even though our inner thoughts may condemn us with storms of guilt and constant reminders of our failures, we can know in our hearts that in His presence God Himself is greater than any accusation. He knows all things.*²

And from the next chapter: *My loved ones, let us devote ourselves to loving one another. Love comes straight from God, and everyone who loves is born of God and truly knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.*

*Because of this, the love of God is a reality among us: God sent His only Son into the world so that we could find true life through Him. This is the embodiment of true love: not that we have loved God first, but that He loved us and sent His unique Son on a special mission to become an atoning sacrifice for our sins. So, my loved ones, if God loved us so sacrificially, surely we should love one another. No one has ever seen God with human eyes; but if we love one another, God truly lives in us. Consequently God's love has accomplished its mission among us.*³

According to the writer of 1 John, God sent Jesus into the world so that we could find true life through Him. Jesus is *the embodiment of true love*. Part of Jesus' *special mission* was to become an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

It can be difficult to define sin, especially when we try to categorize every action or thought as sin or not sin. It's not as cut and dried as we sometimes want to make it to be. But all sin involves some kind of brokenness in relationship. This could be our relationship with God; our relationship with our own selves (physical bodies or other aspects of our being); our relationship with others; or our relationship with the rest of the created world.

All of the topics we've considered in this series are linked with our relationship with God. Our faith affects our decisions in each of these areas; our decisions in each of these areas affects our relationship with God.

¹ <https://www.everence.com/resources/stewardship-education>

² 1 John 3:16-20, *The Voice*.

³ 1 John 4:7-12, *The Voice*.

This morning our focus is on relationship with others. Relationships, like people themselves, come in many forms. They can get complicated and messy. Some people are in relationships they wish they could get out of while others find themselves on the outside of relationships they wish they could get into. At the end of the day – and at the end of our life – what we really need most is to belong, to be loved, and to love. Because of this great need, it's easy to focus on what we don't have in relationships. It can be more difficult to remember what we do have.

To say we are loved is not based on the number of Facebook friends we have. It's not about whether we have ten best friends, or that we are married to the most wonderful person in the world, or that we have the most thoughtful children. All human relationships fall short and disappoint us, even as we ourselves fall short and disappoint those we care about.

The greatest relationship is one we can all have – a relationship with God through Christ who offers the purist and deepest qualities of selfless love any of us can experience. However, God's love can seem elusive; in fact, it's "out of this world." As flesh and blood human beings, we need Jesus with skin on. We need human relationships, ones that come in a variety of forms.

One form human relationships may take is that of mentors and mentees. Two types of mentoring are natural and intentional. Natural mentoring comes in the form of supervisors, managers, coaches, teachers, favorite aunts or uncles, or other adults. We may not introduce these people with the mentor title, but that in essence is how they function in our lives. We watch them and value what we hear them say and see them do.

On the other hand, intentional mentoring results from structured programs where mentors and mentees are intentionally paired. Some congregations have integrated mentoring into their youth ministry programs. Big Brothers and Big Sisters is a well-known organization that sets up mentoring relationships for children. In Salina, Circles of the Heartland partners volunteers with families wanting to make the journey out of poverty.

Some of these mentoring relationships develop into friendships, another form human relationships may take. Jesus had friends. I think he needed friends. He mentored his disciples, and he also called them friends. We also know Jesus had a close relationship with a man named Lazarus. In John 11:3, Mary, the sister of Lazarus, sends word to Jesus about Lazarus, saying: "The one you love is sick." Later, in John 11:35, we read that "Jesus wept" after hearing of the death of Lazarus, his dear friend and brother of his friends Mary and Martha.

Jesus did not insulate himself from the pain associated with friendship. He needed these close relationships for his well-being and wholeness. Jesus was a social as well as spiritual being – just like us. We know that sometimes Jesus would get away to spend time by himself and with God, but he also took time to get away from the crowds and his work to be renewed by hanging out with his friends.

A third category of relationships is family. Family relationships include marriage, parents, and siblings as well as extended family in a multitude of possible configurations.

Marriage relationships are a blessing, but even under the best circumstances are challenging at the same time. Unrealistic expectations placed on a spouse and on a marriage can destroy the relationship. For some couples, there can be a tendency to rely so much on their partner that they fail to maintain their other relationships.

Those of us who are single can idealize marriage and fail to realize that marriage is not needed to be a whole person. In fact, it is not a guarantee of completeness. Being alone is not equivalent with loneliness. Each of us, married or not, needs healthy friendships.

In most cases, we can choose our friends but we can't choose our family. We've all had parents at one time – many have siblings. Family relationships are a blessing, but even under the best circumstance are often challenging as well. Even Jesus had family “issues.” His brothers were not among the first to believe and follow.

I've been fortunate to be part of a loving family, but even so I carry wounds inflicted by my parents and brothers, and I'm sure they carry wounds I've inflicted on them. All families have their struggles and none are perfect, even the ones who appear to have it all together. We are all dysfunctional to one degree or another. And sadly, some people have families in which they are never safe.

You may have noticed a common theme running through my remarks about our interactions with other people. All relationships can be a blessing, but even under the best circumstances are often challenging at the same time. One of the hardest settings in which to be the embodiment of true love talked about in our scripture this morning is among those who know us best..

When singing about God's family earlier, we sang, “I am a person, God made me special. You are a person and you're special too.” We also sang, “So many children, all of them different. God gave each person his (or her) own thing to do.”⁴

We all need to be loved and belong, but we are all different. We have different personalities, different ways of processing information and making decisions, different ways of giving and receiving love. There have been thousands of books (tens of thousands?, hundreds of thousands?) written about relationships. One that came out in 1995 and is still going strong was written by Gary Chapman, “The Five Love Languages: How to Express Heartfelt Commitment to Your Mate.” Subsequently, Chapman wrote books related to this one including “The Five Love Languages of Children,” “The Five Love Languages of Teenagers,” and “The Five Love Languages of Singles.”

The premise of all of these books is the same. There are basically five emotional love languages—five ways that people speak and understand emotional love, five ways people express and receive love. Your love language and the language of your friend or family member may be as different as Chinese is from English. No matter how hard you try to express love in English, if your loved one understands only Chinese, you will have difficulty expressing your love to each other.

According to Chapman, the five love languages are words of affirmation, quality time, receiving gifts, acts of service, and physical touch. This morning I won't go into detailed explanations of each one. I simply want you to be aware that some of the hurt we experience, some of the inability to receive love and have our love received by others may be related to our personalities.

One person feels love when he is told he looks good. Another feels loved when her loved one spends time with her. For one person, even the smallest gift from a loved one is important. For another, help with work that needs to be done means more than a compliment or tangible gift. For many, a hug or a kiss or a hand on the shoulder make all the difference in the world.

In order for us to give and receive love, we need to understand ourselves and also make an effort to understand how our family members and friends may be different from us. We discover this by self-reflection, by observation, and by talking with each other. Each of us can spend years thinking, “If my family or friends really loved me, they would(you fill in the

⁴ *God's Family*, Text and Music: Patricia Shelly.

blank.)” But if we never tell them what we are thinking, they may never know and we will never feel loved by them. It works the other way too. If you’re frustrated because someone is not feeling the love you’re giving, you can ask what would help them to know that you truly love them. It’s complicated. It’s messy. But it’s necessary.

Jesus modeled how to draw strength from his relationships – including his relationships with God, with his disciples and with his friends. These relationships, in turn, empowered him to face his life’s challenges.

Consider the wealth of relationships you have. Take inventory of all that God has given you in the gift of relationships and what you in turn have given back. Make a list of mentors, friends and family that have enriched your life. Make another list of those you are intentionally called to nurture and serve. Think of ways to nurture these relationships.

*My little children, don’t just talk about love as an idea or a theory. Make it your true way of life, and live in the pattern of gracious love.*⁵

⁵ 1 John 3:18, *The Voice*.