

Park Hill United Methodist Church
Building Relationships
September 7, 2008 - Seventeenth Sunday After Pentecost
8:45 AM Service
Rev. John L. Thompson
Matthew 18:15-20

Something tragic has happened in our land, and that something has to do with human relationships. We are less trusting, more suspicious and fearful of opening ourselves to others. Some of us have no truly close friends. We're isolated and alone. We wall ourselves into gated communities, and worse yet, we don't even know the other people behind those walls, much less people outside.

Robert Putnam wrote a book which he titled ***Bowling Alone***. He took his title from the fact that while more people than ever are bowling these days, fewer are doing it in leagues. There has been a steady decline of civic involvement, neighborhood relationships, and participation in volunteer and religious organizations. Putnam found that the level of community in America is at its lowest point in our lifetimes.

Therapist Will Miller also wrote a book which he titled ***Refrigerator Rights***. It has a similar theme. He says we need people around us who have what he calls "**refrigerator rights**." This is someone who can come into our home and feel comfortable going to our refrigerator to make a sandwich without our permission. Miller argues that too many Americans suffer mentally and emotionally because they have too few of these kinds of close relationships. (1)

He's right. Studies show that our society is suffering from our lack of involvement with one another. Not only is our society suffering, so are we as individuals.

Sometime back a team headed by a Harvard social scientist tracked the lives of 7,000 people over nine years. Here's what they found. People with the fewest personal relationships were three times more likely to die than those with strong relational connections. Three times! In fact, people with bad health habits such as smoking, poor eating habits, obesity, or alcohol use, but who had strong social ties lived significantly longer than people who had great health habits but were isolated. (2)

In the words of the old Barbra Streisand song, "**People who need people are the luckiest people in the world . . .**"

Relationships are important. You need to believe that or you cannot appreciate Jesus' words for today. Relationships matter. In fact, in the long run, the only thing that really matters in life is relationships. When life is over, everything we have in this world will disappear and decay. Only one thing will remain: relationships. This is to say we need our relationships to be strong and we want them to last. Now listen to Jesus' words: "***If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.***"

What a teaching? "***If your brother sins against you . . .***". Of course, this does not mean your brother in a literal sense--though it could. Family relationships can be strained or even break. It happens! We may have someone here this morning who hasn't spoken to at least one member of their family in several years. The reasons may vary, but we all know families where relationships have been splintered and torn.

But Jesus isn't talking about our brothers or sisters by blood. He is talking about brothers and sisters within the church community. The early church was like a family. Remember, these people left everything to follow Jesus. Even today, church families can be broken and filled with strife just like normal families.

"If your brother sins against you," says Jesus, "go and show him his fault, just between the two of you . . ." As healthy people we may have many strong personal relationships. If someone you care about hurts you, make an attempt to heal the relationship as quickly as possible even if you are not at fault. I wish everyone who was estranged from a brother or sister or friend or co-worker or spouse would pick up a phone and make an appointment to sit down with that person to iron out their difficulties. Anybody ever hurt you? Feelings of betrayal, anger, hurt, bitterness, and resentment can sometimes overwhelm. Some of you have been there!

Gilbert and Sullivan have thrilled millions with their operettas. For years they were estranged from each other. They still collaborated. But Gilbert would send Sullivan the lyrics of the operetta they were working on by mail, and Sullivan would send Gilbert the music back by mail. But when they had an opening night, they would stand at opposite ends of the stage and bow facing forward, so that they would not ever need to look at each other. The problem was that they had a falling out over the purchase of a new carpet in one of their theaters, and they never settled that grudge. (3)

It happens. The sad thing is that the closer the relationship, often the more intense the anger, the resentment, the bitterness. And it is very difficult to take the first step. Yet Jesus tells us, that is what we must do. It doesn't really matter who is at fault. All that matters is the relationship.

Are you having trouble with your relationship? If you have a relationship that is important to you, sooner or later you are going to have to swallow your pride, and take that first step as Jesus has instructed. ***"If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector."***

In the course of events, there may come a time when you have to end a relationship. Of course, some relationships are sacred. But I will never insist on two people remaining in a bad marriage that is not working. Not even every marriage is made in heaven.

Not every relationship can be healed. Particularly in the case of abuse, not every relationship can be healed, or even should be healed. You may have a friend who brings out the worse in you, who tears you down, who makes you question your essential self-worth. There are some relationships that should be severed. We have to force some people to face the consequences of their actions. It's called tough love.

Jesus tells a story of the prodigal son, but the prodigal has to want to come home, and sometimes that never happens. Relationships matter. If you have a relationship that has been broken and can yet be healed, you take the first step. But not every relationship can be healed. At such times we need to turn to our primary relationship, our relationship with God.

If a relationship that is important to you cannot be healed, you need to reach out to friends. But most importantly, you need to turn to God. Pray for God to heal the relationship. Pray for God to heal you if the relationship cannot be healed, to help you to accept the inevitable and to keep you from bitterness and resentment. But even more, we pray that this experience of a broken relationship will draw you even closer to God. It is from our relationship with God, not with another human being, that we draw our strength and our identity.

Welcome into a church where we specialize in building relationships. I would love to be your pastor. I would love to help you develop a stronger relationship with God.

1. Will Miller with Glenn Sparks, *Refrigerator Rights* (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2002).
2. John Ortberg, *Everybody's Normal Until You Get to Know Them* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Zondervan, 2003).
3. Charles L.Allen, *The Secret of Abundant Living* (Old Tappan, N J: Spire Books, Fleming H. Revell, 1980), p. 91.