

Connecting with God: Relationships Feb. 17, 2017

Last week was Valentine's Day so of course we heard a lot about love, but with a particular slant toward romance: cards, flowers, fancy dates, sexy movies. Often when we think of relationships, we think first of falling in love—but, as exciting as that is, it's only one aspect of the richness of relationships that can bless our lives so much.

In the Biblical creation story, God creates Adam, the first human being, and then says, "it is not good for him to be alone." God creates animals of all kinds, birds and fish and reptiles, and then decides that another human being is what is needed. Eve is created to be a helper for him, but not in the subordinate sense. We know that because the word used for helper, *etzer*, is also applied to God. Adam and Eve are to be partners, companions, helpers to each other. The point is not that everyone should pair up but that we human beings are meant for relationships, and those can take many different forms.

Even romantic love is not an end in itself but the doorway into a deeper relationship of mutual care and trust. And sometimes lovers take the daring step of getting married. I say daring because the vows that we take in marriage are crazy ambitious. Here's how the author Alain de Botton describes marriage: "Marriage is a hopeful, generous and infinitely kind gamble taken by two people who don't yet know who they are or who the other might be, binding themselves to a future they cannot conceive of." *

Crazy, right? Yet it really can work as attested by the number of couples here who have been married more than 60 years. It takes lots of patience and generosity of spirit. Dear Abby says that in a marriage each person needs to plan to contribute 60% of the effort to making the marriage work; it's that spare 10% on each side that can fill in the inevitable gap. A strong marriage can be a tremendous source of strength and an experience of God's grace. I mean, when someone who has seen you at your worst still loves you and sticks with you, that's grace, and that's why marriage can have a sacramental quality. Rachel Held Evans points out that it's not the institution of marriage that's holy; rather, a marriage is made holy when it reflects the self-giving love that Jesus taught us.

But there are two important things we need to say when we talk about marriage from a Christian perspective. First of all, some people claim that there is a proper Christian model for marriage in the New Testament letters that gives authority in the family to the husband alone. Evans points out that this is descriptive not prescriptive. She writes, "Paul is describing the typical Greco-Roman household, complete with a male head-of-house who has authority over his wife, slaves and children...Paul is not arguing that [this] structure is God's design for all people everywhere," but rather he's encouraging Christians to imitate Jesus no matter where they find themselves in the sociological pecking order. "So men are told to be kind to their slaves, gentle with their children and loving with their wives." Those low on the totem pole are to work hard, be

obedient and respectful, not because God has appointed them to that lower place but because we are all called to show love to others in the circumstances we're in. Remember that the early church didn't focus on changing the social order because they didn't expect it to last much longer.

Of course, now we DO try to change injustices in the social order, but the call to do that in a Christ-like way is still in force. I listened to an interview recently with John Lewis, who took part in the civil rights movement from its earliest days desegregating lunch counters and buses. He talked about how they were trained in non-violence, role-playing so they could experience being called names, and pushed and having food thrown at them without backing down OR retaliating with violence. They were instructed: dress nicely for demonstrations, be civil in your language and behavior, and always look your attacker right in the eyes, a way of saying I am a human being, I am a child of God just like you. So we *should* work to make the social order more in line with Jesus' values—but we have to use Jesus' methods too.

The other essential thing I think we have to say about marriage is that sometimes, even despite the best efforts, it doesn't work out. And some people don't want to be married. So it's important to remember that marriage is NOT the one essential for a happy life, which is what I was raised to believe. Life can be filled with all kinds of relationships—great friendships, other family ties, children, neighbors, fellow-advocates of things that are important to you.

And, of course, for Christians, some of our key relationships are with fellow members of the body of Christ, the church. The word for church, *ekklesia*, means "called out" and originally referred to Greek citizens called out for a civic meeting or task. RHE says "church is essentially a gathering of kingdom citizens being called out—from their individualism, from their sins, from the world's ways of doing things—called out for participation in this new kingdom community with one another."

Now, let's be clear--the church is not the Kingdom of God. Anyone who's been part of a church knows: the kingdom hasn't come yet. Church families are messy, like all families; church people have the same flaws and differences of opinion as the rest of the world. BUT the church is the fellowship of those who have experienced God's reign in Jesus Christ and want to live in its blessings. That's what calls us together.

Our reading this morning tells us a bit about how this community works. Paul writes to the church in Galatia: if anyone is found doing wrong, restore that person in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted to pride and judgment. Bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. All must test their own work; all must carry their own loads." He packs so much into a few sentences: calling each of us to be responsible for our own behavior and also to share those burdens that can cause people to fall and go under. By sharing one another's burdens, we can keep walking together as a community.

Not only do we show Christ's love to one another in a Christian community, we also demonstrate it to the world. Evans says, "our purpose as a church is to give the

world a glimpse of the kingdom of God," to point in its direction like a sign post. We try to show that in ordinary things-- like water, like bread and wine, like human touch-- we can see God's presence, "a fantastic mystery that gives meaning to everything." A local church is sacramental when it embodies the love of Jesus Christ not just for ourselves but for those outside the church. "The church universal is sacramental when it knows no boundaries and advances not through power but through acts of love, joy, peace, and mercy" (255-256).

A church is not to be one more club or organization but to be an outpost of the Kingdom of God, even though that Kingdom is still a mystery beyond our grasp. We're united by what we do see, not only in the actions of the church but also out in the world. We don't have a lock on God's activity; we witness it and give thanks.

I read an article a few months ago about the Correspondence Office in the White House, where the staff attempts to respond to the mail sent to the president. Many of the letters are sent on to other government departments to help with specific problems but some defy categories. One from an 8 year old girl said, "Dear Mr. President, I think this country needs more spunk. With all the attacks, the Zika virus and the wars, this country is a sad place. Please do something fun and outgoing; wear a tie dye shirt and shorts to something important; go water-skiing...And please say something to calm everyone down."

The Correspondence Office also receives letters that are heartbreaking. One of the staff handled a letter from a college girl named Ashley in North Carolina. She wrote on Christmas Eve, about her father who had just shot up their house. She said "My father served in the marine corps for 22 years and deployed six times; each time he came back less and less like himself...now the light is gone from his eyes." Retired, suffering from PTSD and medically disabled, he felt isolated and depressed, so he drank. That night she had had to fight her father to get the gun away from him before he shot himself or her or her little brother. She was writing the President to ask for help for veterans and families like theirs.

The staffer put the letter in the priority file for the president, who wrote a personal letter back to the young woman and alerted the VA to see what they could do; he also quoted from the letter when a Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act was passed by Congress.

That sounds like the end of the story but it's not. The staff person who handled that letter kept it hanging over her desk and now is moving on to another job. She says, "(That letter) was one of those moments when you just kind of realize the importance of what you're doing. It led me on a new path. Helping people, helping families like Ashley's, that's what I want to do." A letter from a stranger changed the trajectory of her life. **

God has woven us together in a web of relationships that is beyond our imagining and all those strands are holy. God continually surprises us in just that way,

by showing up in ordinary things –water, dirt, hands, breath, in the bread we eat and the faces that we see—surrounding us with grace. Let us pray.

*interview with Krista Tippett, On Being

** New York Times Magazine, November 2016

Quotations from Rachel Held Evans are from *Searching for Sunday*, Thomas Henry Publ. 2015

