

Love and Strained Relationships: Living with Them

[1 Corinthians 12:31-13](#); [John 2:1-11, 13:34](#)

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Introduction to the reading of John 2:1-11:

The point that John wished to make was that Jesus was uniquely from God, the evidence being his power over physical matter. As John says, "It was the first of his signs [that] revealed his glory..." However, I am going to spring from it in another direction. Listen to this as you would to a story being told to you by a friend in the mall, who begins: "Did you hear about what happened?"

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. John 2:1-11

The story is told of an old man whose grandson rode a donkey while they were traveling from one city to another. The man heard some people say, "Would you look at that old man suffering on his feet while that strong young boy is totally capable of walking?"

So then the old man rode the donkey while the boy walked. And he heard some people say, "Would you look at that, a healthy man making the poor young boy suffer. Can you believe it?"

So the man and the boy rode the donkey, and they heard some people say, "Would you look at those heavy brutes making that poor donkey suffer." So they both got off and walked, until they heard some people say, "Would you look at the waste a perfectly good donkey not being used."

In the final scene, the boy is walking and the old man is carrying the donkey. (From the Stephen Ministry book "Speaking the Truth in Love," by Ruth Koch and Kenneth Houck, p. 133.)

(That is a Stephen Ministry story.) And, isn't that the case? No matter what you do or say, or not do or say, there will be disagreement. As a Christian, how do you live with people who don't always agree with you? The sermon title could be taken two ways: Living with Them, i.e., people who test our patience. Or, Living with Them, i.e., love and strained relationships. I will not speak to what they, those people who disagree with us, should do. Nor will I speak about skills in communication and conflict resolution instruction manuals for those are readily available. I will speak about God and the influence of God's Spirit upon us of how God works within us when we are in strained relationships.

Prayer

Lord, you created us in your image to be whole and loving. Yet, we are fallen from that idyllic world and squabble over anything. Lord, if you have a word of counsel to any person here who is in a tense relationship, help that person to receive your message. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

I chuckle when I overhear the exchange between Mary and her son in the gospel text. I imagine the host confiding to Mary, "This bunch drinks too much. I have run out! This is embarrassing. What am I going to do?" Mary holds up her hand and confidently says, "Don't fret. Jesus is here." She slinks up to Jesus and whispers, "They have run out of wine." Jesus replies, "Why are you telling me? Wine is not our concern. My hour has not yet come. I don't intend to do anything about it." Sounds like: "Bug off, Mother. Let me do my thing in my time." In his mid-sentence, Mary spins around, catches the sleeve of a server and orders, "Do whatever he tells you."

When Jesus was twelve, he did not join the caravan leaving Jerusalem to return to Nazareth, as his parents expected. They could not find him. Worried them terribly. They searched for three days. When they located him in the temple, what was his reaction? "Didn't you know that I must be in my Father's house?" Have any of you teenagers done your thing and later learned that your parents were very upset because they did not know where you were?

If Jesus and Mary could not live without some strain, why would we expect to do so?

There are many accounts of Jesus being in conflict with the religious leaders. Their opposition grew so intense that they had him executed! Obviously, if Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, did not get along with everyone, then we will not. Some of us are fine with that reality. Others of us desperately need the approval or acceptance of people, and we will go to great extent to make sure that there is no conflict. We get very upset when people around us disagree, let alone disagree with us. I know that feeling. I have that problem. That is not being a mature Christian! That is our psychological need expressing itself.

Peace at any price is not Gospel. Love, grace, integrity, justice and service while pursuing peace is gospel. Jesus stood firmly for what he believed. He maintained his integrity as the person of God. The Pharisees and Sadducees tested Jesus often. He would not remake

himself to fit their expectation or to escape the pain that they could inflict. Jesus did not operate out of the need to please people, to win people's approval or their acceptance. He had incredible ego strength! Phenomenal! Much of that strength came from being focused. He was focused upon his heavenly Father and doing the will of his heavenly Father. When we have that focus, it shapes how we relate with people. It reduces the power of their threat because they are not as important as God. And, focus upon God sets us free to love them. It empowers us to ask, "How may God use me to bless them?" (I want you to take this question with you when you leave today!)

Jesus taught, "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also." "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven." Matthew 5:39b and 43-45

That is impossible! It is nonsense! It butts against the force of our emotions and culture. True. We won't, can't do it on our own. It does not happen because of our will. It happens by grace, the gift of God's Spirit of love. The motivation, the thinking, have to come from God. Only then are we likely to ask, "How may God use me to bless the person who makes life difficult for me?"

Why did Jesus teach, "Turn the other cheek?" It is our contribution to the reduction of tension. It is our contribution to breaking the vicious cycle of tit-for-tat-for-tit-for-tat. By absorbing the pain of abuse, we may create a tit-for-tat-for-tit-tit-tit. . . . Many will respond with a generous spirit and kindness when we act out our faith with them.

I am not naive. We do live in a sinful world, and we are sinners. There are personalities who will take our Christian attitude and behavior as signs of weakness; there are bullies; there are Saddam Husseins. That is the price that we pay. Jesus was whipped and crucified by his opponents. But he did not stop being Jesus, the Son of God, God's person. Even on the cross he prayed for those who put him there, "Father, forgive them. They do not know what they are doing."

Pray. Always pray. Pray with an open mind even though that requires considerable discipline. True prayer is demanding (I suspect the muscularity of true prayer is a reason that many do not pray. True prayer requires investment.). We feel driven to unload our emotions and wants on to God. Instead of telling God what to do, listen to God. Instead of justifying yourself to God, pray for blessing upon those who misuse you. That is what Jesus tells us to do. And we are blessed by a softening of our fear and resentment. We are changed. We feel better about ourselves and about the other person. We may even come to have an understanding of the other person.

Ask for God's help to respond as a Christian. Watch for reptilian reaction. Picture an alligator. You have a stick. You poke the alligator. What does the alligator do? Instantly he lunges and snaps at you! You recoil! Do you interact that way to people? I do sometimes. When we are in defensive thinking and self-talk, what do we say to ourselves? How dare he hurt me! This is not fair! He is violating my rights! She is devaluing me! It is as if I don't exist! Who is the subject and object in defensive thinking and self-talk? I. Me. It's about me. Does this ring true to you? When you are upset with someone, who are you usually concerned about? For me it is self. I may be thinking about the other person, but I really am concerned about what is happening to me.

Invite the Holy Spirit to shape your personality so that you are strong and not reactively defensive. Invite the Holy Spirit to give you the grace of a disciplined, Christ-like response. Most of us react. For defensiveness, substitute the God-given grace to act out of your Christian maturity.

Look at the Christians whom you admire and how they handle tensions with people. They have the gift of standing for what they believe, yet are so loving and gracious with people that tensions often don't escalate. These Christians are interested in the welfare, the building-up, of anyone with whom they relate. They know that life is not about them. (Centering on self is the root of so much conflict and defensiveness.) Mature Christians realize that life is about God and God's love filling them and flowing through them to anyone with whom they come in contact.

The gift of love empowers us to step aside and alter the dynamics. God is added to the relationship. I become concerned with God's will. I become concerned with your welfare as well as my own. Under the influence of God's love, I become aware of the possibility and benefit of asking, "How may God use me to bless them?"

The Apostle Paul listed many gifts in his first letter to the church in Corinth. Then he writes, "I will show you a still more excellent way. If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." The beauty of all other gifts is compromised if we do not have love, agape loveth the gift of agape love.

There are three types of love. We have to use adjectives to separate them, but the Greek language of the New Testament writers had three different words for them. There is brotherly love (phileo, as in Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love). I did not marry Charlotte out of brotherly love! I married her out of romantic love, eros. Then, there is agape love, exhorted in the New Testament time after time.

Agape love is Christian love. Paul calls it a spiritual gift. Let us look at it.

Agape love is empathy, right treatment, and support. It is more than emotion. Our English word "love" falls short of communicating what the biblical authors meant. Jesus said: "I give you a new commandment, that you agape-love one another." Question: Does Jesus order us to like each other? No! Question: Does Jesus instruct us to feel warm and fuzzy over each other? No!

Agape-love is empathy the discipline (I choose the word 'discipline' deliberately to contrast it with feeling or reaction) of projecting yourself to walk in the other person's shoes. Agape-love is treating people right no reptilian reaction as God would, even if they abuse us. It is more than reactive. It responds to God's love. Agape-love is helping the other. Agape love is action.

So, what are your goals in your strained relationships? What do you really want from your strained relationship? God's goal is peace and mutual agape-love.

Jesus taught: "Whoever seeks to save his life will lose and whoever gives his life for my sake will find it." Many Christians never grasp Jesus' insight. We are so stuck in our own insecurities and so determined to protect our interests that we miss what Jesus knew, that we are the richest when we are filled with the love of God and pass it on. It makes us whole and strong. It just naturally flows out of us in empathy and gracious acts.

Trust Jesus. He knew about living. He loves you. His love is the greatest gift. Pray that he will give you the gift of love to pass on, as did he. "As I have loved you, you should love one another." John 13:34