

The Perfect Relationship

1. Warm up: Sunday's sermon began with a zany story about how anyone who steps on duck in heaven gets chained to an obnoxious person for the rest of eternity. The punchline in the story reminded us that all of us are, in one way or another, annoying and obnoxious. What's something you have a tendency to do that annoys the people around you? ☺
2. As we move through life, we have a tendency to want to be in relationship with perfect people. We want the perfect spouse, the perfect employer or boss, perfect coworkers, a perfect church and church family, a perfect extended family, perfect friends, and perfect neighbors. But perfect people don't exist. Instead, we're just a bunch of imperfect people looking, and needing, to be in relationship with each other, hoping and needing to make the best of it. So how do we build beautiful relationships with imperfect people? That's what we've been exploring in the sermon series that ended on Sunday. We closed out the sermon series on Sunday by exploring what Jeff called the capstone principle – the last key relationship principle Jesus taught us before ascending into heaven. The setting for Sunday's scripture was after Peter denied ever knowing Jesus three times the night before his crucifixion and after Jesus arose. In our scripture, Jesus appears to Peter to work things out between them. Let's read the passage, as printed on pp. 3-4. We'll read it once entirely in English, then again using the two Greek words for love that appear in the passage.
 - a. Before Jesus' trial and crucifixion, Peter told Jesus, "Even if I must die with you, I will never deny you." Matthew 26:35. But then Peter turned around and did exactly what he said he wouldn't, three times, when Jesus needed him most. How do you think that likely affected Peter? What do you imagine his state of mind was like those first few days after Jesus died and before he arose?
 - b. In our Gospel passage, Jesus keeps asking Peter if he *agapes* him, *i.e.*, loves him with a perfect, there's-nothing-I-wouldn't-do-for-you, divine love. And Peter keeps responding that he *philia*s Jesus, *i.e.*, loves Jesus with a lesser imperfect love like one has for a friend or sibling. How do you think Peter felt as Jesus was quizzing him?
 - c. Despite Peter's acknowledgement that his love for Jesus is imperfect, Jesus affirms three different times that he holds no grudges against Peter and still wants him to be a key leader in the Jesus Movement ("feed my sheep"). When Peter heard that Jesus still wanted him, how do you think he felt?
3. Jeff summed up our Gospel story like this. In effect, Jesus was saying, "Hey Peter, I know that your love for me isn't perfect. It fell short before and it will fall short again. But that doesn't disqualify you. I still want you, and I still want you to be a key leader in my Movement who feeds my sheep. Yes, your love's imperfect, but I still want to be in relationship with you." Jeff went on to say, "In all this, there's a POWERFUL lesson for you and me and our relationships because nobody's ever going to be able to offer us perfect love. You can't even do it, so why would you expect somebody else to be able to.

So, for heaven sakes, let good enough be good enough. Love people as they are, not as you wish they could be. Have some mercy on the people around you. And that's the key word. To love someone as they are requires **great mercy**. That's what we see Jesus doing in our Gospel story. Jesus shows Peter great mercy. That's the capstone principle – the last great thing Jesus wanted to teach us: if we're ever going to build beautiful relationships *that last* we must accept people's imperfection and show great mercy."

- a. Has there been a time in your life when you were seeking perfect relationships and expecting too much from the people around you? How did that affect you and your relationships?
 - b. Why is it so hard to accept how fallible people are in relationships?
 - c. The Bible repeatedly tells us that mercy is at the heart of how God relates to us. Lamentations 3:22 says "God's mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning." Titus 3:5 says, "God saved us, not because of any works of righteousness we have done, but according to God's mercy." How would you define mercy?
 - d. Tell us about a time in your life when someone showed you great mercy. What happened? And how did that feel?
 - e. The Bible says, "Be ye imitators of God, as dear children." Ephesians 5:1. That means we should relate to the people around us the same way God relates to us, showing them great mercy. We have the power to give the people around us the same gift God gave us. Tell us about a time when you actually managed to do that – to show someone great mercy. What happened? And how did that feel?
 - f. Is it possible to have beautiful long-term relationships without being able to show great mercy? Why or why not?
4. In Sunday's sermon, Jeff shared a scene from the sitcom "Everybody Loves Raymond" where Ray and Robert get into a big fight about who has a better marriage relationship. Marie shouts them down, then offers Ray, Debra, Robert, and Amy her best advice about marriage. Read together the dialogue that ensues, as printed on p. 4. Have someone be Marie, someone else be Frank, and someone else be Amy.
- a. Although Marie's advice is a little over-the-top, she nevertheless makes some profound points not just about marriage, but about any long-term relationship. What are the basic points you draw from her comments – and what do you think of them? Is she right?
 - b. The general principle is that we should hang in there and show a lot of mercy in our relationships, but there are exceptions to every rule. So how do we know when to make an exception and end a relationship?

- c. The mercy principle also applies to our relationship with church and church family. John Weborg puts it this way: “The search for the perfect church is an illusion. Some form of satisfaction doesn’t even stand a chance unless one settles down at a place and serves. The church is a feast, not a taste, a meal, not a nibble. One sits and serves with the same people week after week, receiving and being received, disappointing and being disappointed, hurting and being hurt, caring and being cared for. Church people are in it for the long haul, not the short term. The ordinary is more crucial than the extraordinary. The glory of the church is the routine, not the exceptional.” Your thoughts? What do you like or dislike about what Weborg says here?
- d. Jeff closed Sunday’s sermon by asking why God chose to put us in a world of imperfect people and imperfect relationships. What purpose is served by all the hard work we have to do to stay in relationship with imperfect people? The answer, he suggested, is that being in relationship with imperfect people gives us the perfect opportunity to practice imitating God by showing mercy. When viewed that way, being in relationship with imperfect people is the perfect opportunity to grow our souls. As you ponder all we’ve talked about tonight, is there someone in your life you feel led to show greater mercy? If it’s not too sensitive to share, tell us who you’re thinking of, what’s going on, and what it might mean for you to show them greater mercy.

John 21:4-17, selected verses

Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, “Children, you have no fish, have you?” They answered him, “No.” He said, “Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some.” So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, “It is the Lord!”

When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, “Come and have breakfast.” This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time Jesus said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” Then Jesus said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because Jesus said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And Peter said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.”

John 21:4-17, selected verses (with key Greek words highlighted)

Note: **Agape** means divine love, sacrificial love, the kind of love that says there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you. In short, **agape** is perfect love. **Philia** is a lesser, more typical human love – the kind of love you have for a sibling or good friend. Both words appear in our passage below:

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Excerpt from an episode of “Everybody Loves Raymond”

MARIE: Maybe all of you need a little advice from someone who’s in a position to give it. You think we have nothing to offer. We’ve been married 46 years. We’ve seen the lows; we’ve seen the highs.

FRANK: What day was the high?

MARIE (turning to Robert and Amy): You two, you're newlyweds, you're in love. God bless you, you know nothing.

MARIE (turning to Ray and Debra): And you two are always fighting. And the reason you get so upset about it is because you think there's something wrong with that.

MARIE (turning to Frank): Look at us. This is wisdom. This is experience.

FRANK (chomping on a piece of chicken): This is juicy.

MARIE: You want some real marriage advice? I'm gonna give you the secret now. There's gonna be yelling! There's gonna be anger! Don't fight it, accept it!

MARIE (gesturing toward Frank): You love him, you hate him. He disgusts you, look how he eats. You keep your head down, and you plow through!

FRANK (still chomping food): Amen!

AMY: But Marie, you said "hate." How can hate have any place in a marriage?

MARIE (shrugs): You make room. There's gonna be hate. Hate is real. Marriage is real.

(Gesturing toward Frank). We may fight, but . . . we're okay with each other. And you know why? We've endured, we have been through it all. And now...

FRANK: We're waiting for death!

MARIE: Not that we're in a rush.

FRANK: Fair enough.

MARIE: Now THAT's a marriage.