

Sermon: Move: **MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS**

Text: *Colossians 3:5-14 (1072)*

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INTRODUCTION

Before I actually became a parent, I was the world's best parent. It's true. I had it all figured out. I would see incapable parents who seemed helpless while their child had a meltdown in the Olive Garden and think "they just need to have higher expectations." I would see parents riding around with those video screens in cars and say to Kristie: "Why can't parents just talk and sing with their kids in the car?" I would see the food and snacks that other parents were feeding their kids and think to myself – "that borders on child abuse."

Honestly, if they could give out the best parenting award to someone without kids I'm pretty sure I would have gotten it.

Well a few years ago something happened. That something's name was a little whirlwind called Lauren Esther Turner. After a while we stopped going out to eat because we realized it was like a race against the clock. We had 30 minutes to gulp down a nice meal before our little bundle of joy had reached her limit of being confined in a carrier. We realized that for any trip longer than a couple of hours that a little Barney on DVD can absolutely save our sanity. And we realized that kids always want to eat what you are eating, and I'm not ashamed to say that I like M&Ms.

So, for some reason my parent of the year award isn't happening. I was a much better parent before kids.

If all of this sounds ludicrous to you, it should. Parenting obviously takes place in the context of a family with kids. But do you want me to share with you something that is equally ludicrous? It is someone trying to exercise their faith outside of the context of a community of faith.

You can feel like the Christian of the year if you are not committed to a community. You can be the world's greatest servant as long as you don't have to deal with the pesky emails from a Pastor asking you to teach a children's class. You can be the most patient Christian in the world as long as you don't have to stand for an hour after church and listen to all of dear Sister Bertha's complaints about her bursitis. You can be the best singer and worship leader in the world as long as you don't have a Matt Bachman telling you that you're flat.

Just like parenting happens in the obvious context of a family – Living out your faith happens in the obvious context of community.

What, you don't believe me? Then consider this...Jesus said that the greatest commandments were two inseparable ones – loving God and loving your neighbor. Jesus said that if you can't forgive those around you then you are disqualified from God's forgiveness. Jesus said that the world would believe in his divinity when they see the Church living together in harmony. That's why one of the most absurd questions that we can ask is "do we need to go to church to make it to heaven?" Relationships are the playing field where our faith is put into action!

But we all know that relationships are also the place where our faith is severely tested. Relationships are hard. This world, even this church has people in it that are so different than you are. It is tempting to do what most Western Christians really want to do – to hide out. To keep their distance from their faith community. To play it safe.

In this series we are talking about moving in the direction of God. Our goal is to get you unstuck and to get your faith growing. In his letter to the Colossian church Paul starts out in chapter 1 saying that he is praying for them that they are living out their faith, bearing fruit and growing in the knowledge of God. Paul is praying for movement in their faith. So in this series we've talked about how that movement comes through the circumstances in life. God has a way of using circumstances both good and bad to move us in his direction. Last week, we talked about how Jesus is the source of our growth and we asked the question if you really got Jesus.

Today in chapter 3, Paul turns a corner and he starts talking about what the life of a Christian should look like when we are moving in God's direction. And let me just give you the cliff notes version – Paul describes a healthy growing Christian as a person who is living out their faith in their relationships.

ME OR WE?

Let me give you a different perspective on this letter to the Colossian church. Sometimes I wish we had a few more Southern scholars on the panels that translate the Scriptures. You see in the South we have a pronoun that those more pretentious minds in the North refuse to utilize. It is the plural version of you, which is properly written as “you all” but in the south we run it together forming a new word “Y'all.” Now if we want to make y'all possessive that gets even more interesting. It's not Y'all'ses. It's You'n'sus.

The reason that I mention this is that throughout the New Testament there are often cases where the pronoun “you” would be more accurately translated as “y'all.” In the original Greek we can tell by the ending of the verbs and nouns if it is intended to be singular and plural. So, as you read Colossians, the word “you” is more accurately translated as y'all. Right, so now we've established that Paul was Southern. I always knew he got smart by eating grits and cornbread! When Paul uses you in the singular, the translations usually render that as “each of you.”

So why does this matter. Let me read the beginning of chapter 3. Now each time you see the word you used, it is actually the 2nd person plural. Right, all that cornbread made me smart – I've checked it out in the Greek. So let's read 1-4.

Alright we are having fun with this, but do you see what a difference that makes. It's tempting to read a text like this and think that it is all about me and my personal action. But what Paul is describing here is a community context.

Now if you are having trouble believing this, then let's set it in the wider context of Paul. Paul writes in Romans 12:5 that:

So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

And he says something similar in I Corinthians 12:12:

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.

Paul is famous for his vice lists. You know those lists where he just goes off and tells us all the things we shouldn't do. If you analyze all of those lists from Paul you'll find about 60 vices, but the bulk of those vices are issues related to relationships. You'll see a vice list in just a moment and again you can see how many are related to community.

So if relationships are the soil where our faith grows then how can we tend our soil? I believe Paul offers us 3 steps in tending to our relationships. I know Paul is writing this in the context of their community of faith, but I believe these principles can be applied to any of your relationships. Here are the three steps.

Divest

The first step is divest. Let's read 3:5-10.

Paul names in these few verses Paul names a dozen destructive behaviors that can wreak havoc on your relationships. This isn't rocket science. We all have behaviors that we know are destructive. Some of these things are just abrasive behaviors that push people away like anger and rage. Other behaviors are passive like slandering others or lying to others. And then some behavior is just using people for your own selfish purposes like sex with no strings attached, undressing someone else with your eyes, wanting what they have.

But all of these behaviors are destructive to our relationships. There's a pretty good chance that you have some behaviors in your life that are destructive to relationships. Maybe you haven't thought it was that big of a deal, but today you are realizing that relationships are serious business to God. Or maybe you know that you have some of these behaviors but you have struggled to change – that your anger just jumps out or you keep falling in the trap of slandering other people with your words.

You need to read verse 9-10 where Paul says that Jesus wants nothing less than to make you into a new person. Maybe it's time to give in to the transformation that God wants to initiate in your life.

But then maybe there's a third type of person here today that is just clueless. Your history is littered with broken relationships and you have trouble making and maintaining relationships. Maybe you've played the blame game but if you were really honest with yourself, the common denominator is you.

I really like this word "divest." It's a business term. Over the last few years we've seen it happening in the auto industry. Products that aren't helping a business to grow are divested. General Motors got rid of Hummer, Saab, Saturn and Pontiac, and over the past few years, Ford has all but entirely eliminated its overseas properties, selling Jaguar, Land Rover, Aston Martin and Volvo to the highest bidders. So they divested anything that wasn't helping the company grow.

What Paul is suggesting to us in his letter is that we divest ourselves of behaviors that don't help us grow in our faith. And these behaviors are all related to community.

Chances are you have some behaviors that are holding you back from growing in your relationships and in your faith. What Paul does is up the ante for us. This is not just about being nice...this is about maturing in your faith and putting on a new self in the image of God. So, we probably all have some divestment to do before we are going to really grow.

Re-Think Identity

The second step that Paul describes is re-thinking our identity. Look at verse 11.

Let me give you this list in what would probably be our modern day equivalent to help you get it. Here it is in The Message:

Here there is no Methodist or Baptist, religious or postmodern, American Citizen or undocumented resident, white collar worker or blue collar worker these all mean nothing. From now on everyone is defined by Christ, everyone is included in Christ.

What Paul is talking about is the radical leveling that occurs around the cross of Christ. Our differences fall away as we assume our new identity as the body of Christ.

The problem is our pride. CS Lewis writes that pride is the one sin that has trouble being acted out with others. By its very nature, our pride needs to separate us from others and set us up as superior. In fact, Western Christians might struggle the most with this. In many other non-western cultures the individual is defined by their family, or their community context while we in the West tend to value individuals based on our own personal achievements. So a lot of our existence is in trying to differentiate ourselves from others by having more education, a nicer car, a better house, a more PC lifestyle, an apple computer, an iphone because blackberrys are so last year.

Right, so Paul's instructions are radical for us. He wants to strip away some of our crutches that help us feel good about ourselves. He says all these things mean nothing.

So let's go back to that business analogy. A business that wants to grow first divests the components that are dragging it down, but then it searches to find out who it is and what it does well. A growing company is a company that knows who it is. Burger King realized this a few years ago when it decided to just appeal to young men 18-30. That's why they have Paris Hilton in their ads and sell the most unhealthy stuff possible.

Here's where your faith is really put to test in relationships. Instead of reaching for all the normal status symbols, Paul instructs us to instead to reach for Jesus. To get comfortable in allowing Jesus to define our identity. It sounds simple, but for us in the Western church this is a radical countercultural move.

But going back to CS Lewis' point – pride kills relationships. How can you possibly be in healthy relationships when everyone is trying to be at the head of the pack. Your faith grows best in the context where you see yourself as equals.

Invest

If you thought re-thinking your identity was bold, then hold on for this third one. Paul writes in verse 12-14.

This list is the opposite of the destructive behaviors. These are all ways of investing in other people...to love them, care for them, practicing kindness, humility, gentleness, patience, forgiving.

Going back to our business analogy...companies that want to grow divest the bad parts, find their identity and then begin to invest in the ventures that contribute to growth. Here's where the business analogy falls short, because as Christians our greatest growth occurs when we choose not to serve our own interest but rather the interest of others.

What Paul is describing here is the kind of person that we all love being around. This person doesn't drain you or have high demands. This is a person that gives you life. It's the kind of person that after you walk away from a conversation with them you walk away feeling stronger and loved and optimistic.

So this third step in tending relationships is learning to invest in others. It's doing what Paul wrote about in Philippians 2:3-5

Don't be selfish; don't live to make a good impression on others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourself. Don't think only about your own affairs, but be interested in others, too, and what they are doing. Your attitude should be the same that Christ Jesus had.

CONSIDER CRITICAL RELATIONSHIPS

Okay so we've seen how relationships are a critical piece of living out our faith. And we've seen how Paul wants us to tend to our relationships by divesting destructive behaviors, rethinking our identity and by investing in others. But let's bring this down to you today. This all sounds good, but what might this mean for you today.

1. Family

What about in your family? How are your relationships? With your spouse? With your children? With your parents? What would it look like to tend to those relationships using biblical principles? What hurtful behaviors are destroying your family? Now before you point the finger at someone else, let's talk about you. Are you pushing people away with abrasive behavior? Are you being passive and tearing down the relationship when the other person isn't aware of it. Or maybe you have engaged in behavior that is selfish and absolutely destructive.

We are blessed that Paul actually spends some time here talking about family relationships. I'll let you read it but he has something to say to wives, husbands, children and parents. He hits a couple of destructive behaviors and then he does something really radical by the first century standards. He practices this radical equality by arguing that even wives and children should be respected and cared for. That is a huge statement coming from a first century culture where wives and children had very few rights and few were concerned about their treatment.

If you were really honest with yourself, do you see yourself as superior to that family member that you are struggling with? If you are walking with the Lord, he is remaking you into a new identity. As you grow in your faith, you should find yourself acting like Christ in that he humbled himself and was willing to identify himself as one of us. This could be a huge game-changer in how you interact with your spouse, your kids, your parents.

And in each case, Paul suggests an investment. Wives submit to husbands in a way that shows respect. Husbands love their wives. Children obey their parents. Fathers practice care in your discipline. If you were really honest, are you investing in the lives of those in your family?

2. Work

And how are things at work? You see these principles that Paul gives us go well beyond the church. And we all know that most of our workplaces are highly competitive. So, are you playing the game and destroying others so that you look better? Or, are you investing in others and being a source of life for your office or workplace? This is where the rubber meets the road in your faith.

3. Church

And how are things in your relationships at church? I'm always intrigued when I hear people talk about their church and they refer to it as "they." It tells me that there is a huge disconnect. So is it still "me and them?" Are you convinced yet that you need this ragtag band of believers to live out your faith? You may not like to hear this, but you are better in community. Studies show that you are happier, that you make better decisions if you are in a community where you know and are known. We've been promoting our Spring small groups but maybe you are still keeping your distance because relationships are risky and messy. But, if you are going to move in the direction of Christ, you need friends to keep you accountable, to challenge you, to encourage you. And somebody here needs you to invest in their life so that they can move closer to God as well.

Conclusion

I know somebody came in today ready to claim the title of Christian of the Year and you've had your bubble busted today. That's okay. You see, Actual Parenting is so hard but its also so fulfilling. For some here, this might be the missing piece for you. That when you finally engage your faith deeply in community the pieces start coming together in finding a deeply meaningful faith. My prayer for you today is that you are tending the soil of your relationships and moving in the direction of God. Let's pray.