

Improving Relationships

Date: February 18, 2007

Text: I Corinthians 5: 1,2; 6: 13-20

The scripture and topic for today's sermon were selected some time ago but given all the attention paid to Anna Nicole Smith this week Paul's comments about Christian values become even more pertinent. Isn't it amazing that "The Today Show" devoted 30 minutes to the death of a very mixed up woman and the tragic fight over her baby? Doesn't all the interest only highlight the fact that our society is terribly confused when it comes to the diversity and complexity of human relationships? A new TV show appeared two weeks ago, "Rules of Engagement." It features three men and not one of them has a decent relationship with women or even understands what that might be! Is it any wonder that the next generation is bewildered or goes astray when all around them they see such terrible models for relationships? A television critic noted in talking about what's on TV, "Our programs are beamed around the world. In watching, many people in other countries rightly would be saying to themselves 'do we really want to adopt American customs?'" My hope this morning is that through scripture we can find a deeper understanding to help us live in all kinds of relationships.

The passage from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians thrusts us into the middle of the First Century debate on cultural values. Paul, as always, has strong opinions and is not afraid to share them. However, it's not just a matter of taking what the Apostle said and applying it literally to issues facing us in 2007. For one thing, the Bible does not deal directly with some of the perplexing issues of our day such as drug usage or abortion as we discovered in the lunch bible study. Also the Bible comes out of a totally different cultural context than ours. Do we want to accept Paul's comments about women not speaking in church and obeying their husbands and apply that standard today? Some churches do that and women are told to be obedient to their spouses. To put it mildly, that doesn't work among the Presbyterians I know.

Scholars suggest that a distinction has to be made between the customs of the First Century and the basic principles laid down by Christ and the early Church. For instance, divorce was frowned upon in Jesus' day. If a marriage did fall apart, it was much easier for a man to get rid of his wife and almost impossible for the wife to separate from her husband. Do we want to carry that practice over to 2007 or is it wiser to look to the manner in which Jesus treated people especially women and to be guided by that principle? Jesus offered compassion, forgiveness and a second chance to all he encountered. In following Jesus' approach, the Presbyterian Church has affirmed the importance of marriage while also recognizing that if the relationship becomes abusive or destructive than something has to be done. Thus, our Church follows Jesus' principles rather than 1st Century Christian practices and seeks to offer understanding, forgiveness and a second chance but never does so lightly. Given the on-going tumultuous debate within denominations regarding homosexuality, it also needs to be noted that much stronger condemnation is found of adultery than homosexuality in scripture

In addition, whenever we look at New Testament ethics, we need to be cognizant of the fact that Paul and others were convinced that Christ would come again shortly. Church organization or personal relationships are seen in a different context if that is true. Paul basically said all of a person's energies in this short time span need to go into preparing for the Lord's coming. In part, that explains Paul's reservations about Christians marrying. Marriage calls for too much of a time commitment when the end time is so near. The long delay in that Second Coming compelled the Church to wrestle with ethical issues in a different setting.

Now consider the context for our morning lesson from Corinthians. Corinth was a cosmopolitan city with travelers and ideas from around the Empire. Many of its people believed in the Greek notion of indulging one's desires and that sex was simply another physical habit. Thus, as a person is free to eat when hungry so if he or she feels like sex it is okay to satisfy that urging. Doesn't that sound pretty much like the philosophy expounded on TV night after night?

The Church at Corinth got caught up in the ways of that society. The church today constantly battles a similar temptation to simply go along with whatever culture is advocating. Paul strongly condemned Corinthian Christians for their laxity. Sexual relationships were not divorced from the rest of life, he wrote. What an individual did with their body impacted upon their moral being, which was the opposite of the Greek contention. Paul went back to Genesis 2 and the idea of “two people becoming one” as a guiding principle. What is clear in this passage is that Paul was critical of the church for remaining silent while its members were engaged in immoral acts such as a man sleeping with his father’s wife as mentioned in the 5th chapter. Does not the Church have standards of ethical behavior to which its members need to adhere? The debate on this matter still goes on, as we know.

I wish our teenagers were here this morning (they are on retreat) to get another perspective on relationships and sexuality. Given the exploitation of sex today, it’s important for us to realize that Christianity views sex very positively as part of a sharing, growing relationship between two people. On their wedding night, the Bible says, “Abraham went in and KNEW Sarah.” Sex is very much a part of a growing intimacy between two people. There are, however even broader implications in what Paul was saying. In all relationships, respect for one’s self and the other person is essential. Burgundy Basin Inn, a wedding reception hall, once ran an ad that said, “Eat, drink and get married.” Relationships are much more than that. There has to be integrity and one never simply uses another person sexually or in any other way.

Relationships are to be based on the Biblical concept of love. Scott Peck defines love as “giving your full attention to someone else.” A woman once came into a counselor unhappy with her marriage. The counselor asked at one point, “What does your husband think about all of this?” “Oh,” she blurted out, “my husband is a mysterious island. I am forever circling around it but never find a beach where I can land.” Christian love calls for openness, sensitive, understanding. Christians are called to go the second mile even when the other person is less than totally responsive. It’s not easy all the time but it is the type of love that God in Christ shows for each of us.

Relationships, whether it be parent and child, friends or marriage, take commitment and hard work. There are many levels of relationship but long term intimate sharing demands a willingness to hang in there even when things aren’t going as well as we would like. Special attention needs to be given to Paul’s stress on the importance of not doing anything that would be a poor model for another person’s behavior. Isn’t that attitude sadly is missing in the words and actions of many of the heroes of our day?

There is so much more to say on the subject of relationships but I hope that you will sense that the Bible can provide a guide as we seek to relate to one another and that Christ does give us a model for how to treat each other. Respect, concern, commitment, that’s what Christianity has to offer and how desperately our society needs to move in that direction.

At weddings I often share this story. A teacher once asked her fourth grade class to write a biography of Ben Franklin. One young girl wrote

Benjamin Franklin was born in Boston. He got onto the boat and went to Philadelphia. He got off the boat and he bought a loaf of bread. He walked up the street. A woman saw him and laughed at him. He married the woman and discovered the power of electricity.

Such is the power and possibility available to us in all our relationships through our faith in Jesus the Christ.