

Shiloh United Methodist Church

2 Corinthians 8:7-15

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June

Three Simple Rules: Stay In Love With God

2 Corinthians 8:7-15 Common English Bible (CEB)

⁷ Be the best in this work of grace in the same way that you are the best in everything, such as faith, speech, knowledge, total commitment, and the love we inspired in you. ⁸ I'm not giving an order, but by mentioning the commitment of others, I'm trying to prove the authenticity of your love also. ⁹ You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Although he was rich, he became poor for our sakes, so that you could become rich through his poverty.

¹⁰ I'm giving you my opinion about this. It's to your advantage to do this, since you not only started to do it last year but you wanted to do it too. ¹¹ Now finish the job as well so that you finish it with as much enthusiasm as you started, given what you can afford. ¹² A gift is appreciated because of what a person can afford, not because of what that person can't afford, if it's apparent that it's done willingly. ¹³ It isn't that we want others to have financial ease and you financial difficulties, but it's a matter of equality. ¹⁴ At the present moment, your surplus can fill their deficit so that in the future their surplus can fill your deficit. In this way there is equality. ¹⁵ As it is written, *The one who gathered more didn't have too much, and the one who gathered less didn't have too little.*

I have a friend name Frank and he tells this story about his son Justin:

When Justin was a little boy, he would dress up like his favorite characters. Unlike other children, Justin took this role of playing his favorite characters seriously. At one point he was into being Peter Pan, and at some point it became clear that if Frank wanted to get his son's attention he would have to take this role seriously. Justin would answer to no other name at that point except "Peter." Frank would finish cooking dinner and he would call out, "Justin it is time to eat."

In the other room he would hear Justin talking with Wendy Darling, or conversing with lost boys about what to do that night, and would not hear any movement toward the dinner table. Frank finally learned to finish cooking dinner and call out, "Peter, dinner is ready," Then Justin would finish swashbuckling pirates and captain hook and come running.

At this time in Justin and Frank's life they were going regularly to Catholic mass that celebrated the eucharist or communion. Frank had been finding the practice meaningful and his son Justin would go along, or maybe we should say "Peter" went along with tinker-bell in tow.

One day when Frank was cooking dinner he heard from the other room, "Lumiere and Cogsworth you must stop." If you don't know these names, they are characters in Disney's Beauty and the Beast. Just to see the change in play, Frank went into the other room and said, "I see you have changed your world. Who are you playing in this world? Gaston?"

Justin looked up and said "No, I am Belle."

A little while later Justin was out in his sandbox in the backyard and Frank heard Justin again change the world of his play. “This is the body of Christ and the blood.” The words coming from the backyard intrigued him again.

He went to go watch and there in the sandbox sat Justin, with a blanket draped over his shoulders. Pouring sand into a cup and offering it to a few of his gathered stuffed animals. Frank comments that he wasn't surprised by this young boy playing the priest, acting out a world he had seen played out each week at mass.

As Frank watched something changed on Justin's face, he ran back inside the house. When he emerged, he had an armful of his other stuffed animals, and he went back for another arm full after that.

He sat the stuffed animals in semi-circle of mixed fur and colors around him and he began pouring sand into any container he could find and placing it in front of each one. Justin's face suddenly grew concerned. As he was pouring and handing out the containers by placing one in front of each animal, Justin grew concerned when he ran out of containers for each animal. Justin's face contorted into one of those pondering concerns, and then you could see it light up.

He began moving animals, so two or three would be around a single cup. Until each animal was in a place to share a cup of God's love with one another.

Today we are continuing our sermon series on Three Simple Rules. The first week we learned about how to “Do No Harm.” Last week we

learned what it means to “Do Good” as a part of God’s people. This week we learn the final of the three rules that Methodist founder John Wesley shared with the people called Methodist, “Stay in love with God.”

In our culture we equate love with giving and receiving gifts, and the fairytale love story with the happy ending, this rule is hard. A love that is passionate to fall together quickly because the fates determine it. In our media world, much of our understanding of love has come from movies that tell us love is overcoming the challenges to first find the relationship that makes you feel connected to another. The romance story of overcome great odds to end up with the one you love, the one who makes your life complete are what we think of when we imagine a love story. Disney princesses or heroes that defy the odds come to mind.

For anyone who has been in a long term relationship or has family of any kind or has maintained healthy long-term friendships, you know that maintaining the love in a relationship can be hard work. Healthy-long-term-living relationships take a lot of energy and practice.

If you meet couples or friends that stay in loving relationships and together for a long time I notice two traits about their relationship:

1. They tell stories about their connection to friends and to others. These stories may seem mundane, but if you look deeper you will see that they are sharing the good news about how this relationship makes them feel more whole.
2. They practice their love by regularly through taking time with one another, doing things they enjoy with each other, and by getting away from regular life to spend time together.

In our scripture today from Paul, Paul is actually encouraging the Corinthians to pay into a fund to help another church, specifically the

church in Jerusalem. While this may seem a strange passage when we talk about staying in love with God, I want to highlight when Paul calls the Corinthians to act in Grace. Grace is the part in our relationships where there is give and take, and flexibility that allows us to be in relationship through giving and receiving what is offered to us. In a relationship this is what taking time together is about is offering loving grace to one another, to offer one's being in some way to another, through time, talent, or presence we offer to the other something they need to live life abundantly. Paul is calling the Corinthians to recognize that their offering is one act of Grace in a larger relationship with what God is doing with a church somewhere else, so it is in fact a beautiful image of giving to a relationship.

How then do we act in grace within our relationship with God?

As I said before, the same way couples or families or good groups of friends work out long term relationships. They tell stories and learn to recognize in their stories where love shows up, and in our relationship with God that means we tell stories where we see God show up. Second, they practice the relationship, and in the case of God we know through Jesus the ways to stay connected to God through community worship, prayer, and service.

Let's focus on these practices of relationship for a minute because they get confused in our culture.

Worship for many non-churchgoers seems strange. They correlate worship with us pledging allegiance to God, as if in some frenzied state of unquestioning devotion. On the contrary, like Justin in our first story we are playing out our understanding of our relationship to God, we are practicing an understanding that God loves us and how we learn to love others together. Community worship and gathering with God's people encourages us to stay in relationship with God because we find

our loving God to help us to live life abundantly, to help us do less harm in the world, and to find ways to do good. I joked last week at the smaller of the 2 services at the church I serve, that the small group was nice because it was more like “playing” church than “doing” church. I said that because in smaller settings of worship, sometimes it is easier to see how we are acting grace out with each other because you know the stories being acted out. I know the people who disagree with each other are serving communion to one another, the one less sure of themselves is speaking out in prayer, and how individuals are humbled by God’s love showing up for them. When we read the stories of God together and discuss and work them out, we are also learning what the relationship with God too. Scripture and sermons are part of this, but I will get back to storytelling in a minute.

Prayer is sometimes seen as so formal, but in truth it is what my youth leader called it growing up, “a conversation with God.” A healthy prayer life takes intentional time in conversation, regular prayer, just like it is healthy to take intentional time with a loved one whom you value. It also involves the everyday conversations, “God help me...” is the most popular. However, I hear “thank God” ranks up there too. By practicing prayer with our speaking, our listening, and just like a healthy human relationship involves healthy physical contact, so does prayer involve physically putting our body in a place to experiencing the relationship too. Yoga, physical forms of prayer, exercise, and other things that physically engage the relationship of prayer are important too.

Service is the final relationship, and it may be an act of prayer and worship. Jesus demonstrated that by serving others we grow our relationship with God. Believing God is in all and works through all of us means that through service we ease suffering and offer hope to others and the world. This is the ultimate relationship because we are using our whole being to be a part of abundant life in this world. This

isn't all hammers and nails either, this is listening, calming, and bringing the peace we experience with God to places where people are struggling to find peace.

Now, let me get back to storytelling and Good News. We need to do the practices of relationship I just talked about, but staying in love means we participate in noticing where our relationship with God is happening and naming it.

There is a scripture in the Gospel of Mark where Jesus is wading through a crowd on the way to heal a dying little girl. As he wading through the crowd a woman who has been bleeding for a long time crawls through the crowd and touches Jesus prayer shawl. She is healed instantly of her long term ailment. Jesus then stops and asks, "Who touched me?"

The woman is fearful, but she rises and says it was her. Then Jesus says, "Daughter your faith has made you well."

Bible stories are meant to remind us the Good News of what Jesus did. We know in this story Jesus did good by healing the woman, but more than that there are more things the Gospel writer wanted us to know. This woman was rejected by her people, her illness had isolated her, people had done what some of us do when illness hurts someone we know, we avoid because perhaps we fear the disease or we fear losing relationship to the disease. Jesus not only healed this woman, but by calling her daughter he also welcomed her back into a relationship with the loving God they both knew.

There is so much more depth to this story, but for today I want to focus on the healing and the re-establishment of relationship. We as people of God tell the gospel stories to remind us that God works through even the messiest of human ailments and rejection to call us back to a grace

filled love. Telling these stories is important because we as Christians need to begin to name where we see them happening in the stories of our lives. By doing this we get to stay in love with God, by seeing the relationship God continues to offer in our world through us, and to us.

David Flood supports students in our country by speaking and reminding them of their self-worth and he shares this story:

David's son is autistic, his son's name, like Frank's from earlier is Justin. In middle school when his son, Justin, would come home from school, David would say, "Who did you sit with at lunch today?"

Justin would say, "No one."

Autism can be isolating because the social centers of your brain don't work the same way. Even in High School Justin comes home some days saying he sits with someone and many days he sat with no one at lunch.

Justin began skating in middle school and begged to play on a hockey team. One game the other team was ahead 8-3. The puck got loose and one of Justin's teammates got it. They skated toward the goal together, the puck was shot at the goal and it bounced off the crossbar, and then Justin was able to make the goal after goalie didn't quite make it back to the goal.

His team went wild and surrounded Justin, and his tears of joy were real and his sense of belonging became very real.

David went over to the opposing teams coach with tears in his eyes and said, "Thank you for doing that."

The opposing team coach looked at David, a father so thankful, and said, “Don’t thank me, it was the boys on my team with the idea.”

These stories matter, because we can name God’s healing grace and love in them. God showed up so a boy could be brought back and reminded he was a part of God’s community no matter how isolated he feels. A boy practiced communion by serving everyone and finding a way for compassion to be shared with all. We stay in love with God by staying in relationship with each other and with God.

Friends as you go into this week, I want you to find one story of God’s presence in your life to bring back to church next week. I want you to find a moment to tell that story to another person, and let them know where you see God active in the world. As you practice this storytelling remember that prayer and worship and service will keep you growing in that relationship, and help you be a part of the story God is writing through us and with us in the world.

Amen