

“If I Had a Hammer,” September 13, 2009

When our daughter moved into the first home she owned for herself, we made sure that she had the one essential ingredient for every household—a supply of tools. Actually, her first tool box was made up of the hand tools that my Dad had collected over the years, so it was both practical and a keepsake. Clearly, one of the most important tools in the box was a hammer, but after trying to use it for a variety of tasks, she quickly learned that just having a hammer wasn't enough. A hammer worked for some things, but it was often quite ineffective for other things. She needed those other tools that we had put in her toolbox.

As I think about it, the same thing applies to our relationships. I'm aware that some of us have issues sometimes with the significant people in our lives. And often it's because we're operating as though we have a hammer, and only a hammer to work with. Instead, it takes a variety of tools to make any relationship work well. We need a whole tool box full of certain kinds of gifts and skills and characteristics. This morning, I want us to think about the important elements that are essential for our relationships to be meaningful, whether they're with our life partners, our kids, our parents, our friends.

One place we might start is with our Bible passages, which offer some suggestions of the vast array of tools we need to know and use in order for our relationships to be really live-giving. In some ways, the two passages offer the “do's and “don't's” of meaningful relationships.

For instance, the writer of Luke's gospel says, “**Don't pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults.**” And Paul, in the Corinthians passage, tells us: “**Love is patient and kind.**” Those are two very different ways of making the same point. Treating people kindly does not include picking on them, berating them about their mistakes and criticizing their faults. Whenever I hear someone criticizing another person for something he or she has done, I usually think less of the person who's doing the criticizing. I realize, and you probably do, too, that putting another person down is usually an attempt to make us look better, but it doesn't usually work.

Being patient and kind are two wonderful gifts we can give a friend, a family member, a co-worker. My mother used to say,

“If you can't say something nice about someone, don't say anything at all.” Kindness includes affirmation and encouragement, and they tend to produce much more positive relationships than criticism ever will! The reality is, however, that kindness often requires patience. In any relationship, there are habits and eccentricities that drive us crazy. Of course, I don't have any of those, but Mike sure does!!!! ☺

Seriously, we all do things that can become annoying and tiresome, but criticizing and nagging are not effective at encouraging people to change. To make fun of someone's foibles is not endearing, and is a far cry from being loving and patient. So one of the characteristic of good relationships is the capacity for being patient and kind, rather than being picky and critical. Nina Burleigh, in her article, “Five Best Things to Do for Your Relationship,” writes: “**Change from a critical habit of mind, in which you're very involved with your partner's mistakes, to a positive one, in which you catch him (or her) doing something right. Notice one small thing, and express genuine appreciation.**”

You see, what we're really talking about here is basic to any kind of relationship; it has to do with respect. To put down another person, or name call, is not being respectful. It dishonors another. A friend recently shared an experience with someone who criticized a decision she had made by saying that it was a crazy idea. My friend felt dishonored, and she had every right to. We need to be respectful of one another, whether we agree with their stance, or not. Doing something differently from the way we'd do it is not wrong; it's just different, so if we are people who want to be faithful to the way God would have us live together, then we have to be respectful of one another. Dorothy Allison has said, “**I don't believe there is any true friendship without a bond of honor, and the honor in friendship is the respect you give the other that she also gives you.**” **R-e-s-p-e-c-t—respect—it's essential in every relationship.**

And there are more essentials. For instance, in the Corinthians passage, Paul writes, “**Love is not jealous, conceited or proud.**” Having any of those characteristics basically tells of a self-absorbed person, someone who's always bragging about one thing or another to the exclusion of any other conversation. It's always “I”, and “me” and “my” and there never seems to be any interest in what's going on in the other person's life. A real friendship, a real marriage, a real connection with our parents or

our kids, involves our being interested in the other person, and asking about their well-being, their interests, their hopes and dreams. If we don't know what's on the other person's mind, we might ask ourselves if we've asked them, or left any opening for them to share. It's a basic conversation tool, but it's always good to ask, "How's it going with your life?"

The Luke passage talks about giving away your life, and I believe we can understand that several ways. Whenever I hear that phrase "give away your life," I think of the necessity of extending oneself, getting past one's personal needs and desires, and focusing on the other. It also reminds me of what Scott Peck wrote in his classic book, *The Road Less Traveled*. He said that "Love is the will to extend oneself for one's own or the other's spiritual well-being." That means that we reach beyond our natural tendencies to be self-focused, and try to encourage and promote that which helps the other person live into the person they're created to be. It includes encouraging them, listening to them, feeling with them and for them, caring for them.

There's so much more we could talk about that's important in any friendship or family relationship—like having a sense of humor and laughing together, like being on the same team when the rough times come, like learning to listen intently to the other person, but they're entire messages in and of themselves. However, there's one really important tool that needs to be in all of our connections, and it is named in Paul's writing: "Love does not keep a record of wrongs." It's all about forgiveness.

Whenever I do a wedding message, I always include the importance of forgiveness, because I fear that most of us aren't very good at it. Forgiveness has to do with the willingness to let go of the bad feelings and ill will associated with another person. The simple truth is that every single relationship has pieces of it that include hurt, and hurt always is in need of forgiveness.

You see, we're just not perfect people, and sometimes we say or do things that are hurtful to someone else; that's where forgiveness fits in. Lewis Smedes once wrote a

book about the importance of forgiveness with a chapter entitled, "Forgiveness fits faulty people." We are all faulty people, and we all stand in need both of forgiving others when they hurt us, and seeking and receiving forgiveness when we've hurt someone else.

I know folks, and maybe you do, too, who can replay every little slight they ever received, and who will willingly recite a litany of such hurts to anyone who is willing to listen. They carry around a lot of bitterness and anger, and never seem to be able to let go of it. While it seriously threatens a relationship, it actually poisons the person who is holding onto such bitterness.

We have to learn to forgive, and we have to keep working in that direction, even if it takes lifetime. Harboring ill will is destructive, not just of the relationship that initiated the bitterness, but of every single relationships the "holder-on-er" has. If you or I happen to be that person, the only thing that will enable us to find peace in our souls is learning to forgive. That process requires God's help. If we ask God to ease our pain and to lessen the ill will we hold, I believe God will work in our hearts to do so, but we have to be sincere, and really mean it. Forgiveness has to be present in every one of our connections with others.

There you have it—McCoy's thoughts on the makings of good relationships. They involve being kind and patient, showing respect for the other person. It means we extend ourselves to help the other person be the best he or she can be; we stand by them. And we forgive, and forgive and forgive. A tall order, but it's definitely worth the effort.

Close:

Antoine St-Exupery wrote: "Man is a knot, a web, a mesh into which relationships are tied. Only those relationships matter." I believe he was right. After all, life is about relationships, and how we relate to one another definitely has a lot to do with our relationship with God. May all our relationships be loving and meaningful.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace.

