

Relationships Series: Independence

I read the Wikipedia dictionary definition of codependency the other day and I found that it explained almost every-thing that's wrong with me. Here's "Wiki":

***Codependent relationships** are a type of dysfunctional helping relationship where one person supports or enables another person's addiction, poor mental health, immaturity, irresponsibility, or underachievement. Among the core characteristics of codependency, the most common theme is an excessive reliance on other people for approval and identity.*

I won't personalize that any further -- I'll just leave it to your imagination. Actually, I wasn't 100% serious about my earlier statement. Everyone knows, now, that these codependent relationships are not healthy, that they allow us to remain in addictive or otherwise destructive patterns of behaviour and keep us immature and irresponsible. But the answer to this problem of "enabling relationships" is not independence. It won't make us all better people if we can become like the Lone Ranger and solve all our own problems without anyone's input. In other words, the answer to the problem of unhealthy relationships is not "no relationships", but strong, mutual, healthy ways of interacting with others. We're talking about building into our lives new sources of strength and encouragement in the journey of faith.

Let's look at a couple of examples to illustrate healthy relationships, those that enable greatness rather than destructive behaviour. I hope you don't mind my bringing up one of my favourite series of books and films, "The Lord of the Rings", one more time, but they contain a brilliant example of a relationship that carries two individuals to survival and success. The two friends are hobbits, Frodo Baggins and Sam Gamgee. Frodo is the one who has the important mission, but he cannot complete it without the help of his friend Sam.

One of the things that J.R.R. Tolkien - the author of the Lord of the Rings - and C.S. Lewis shared in common was that both were officers, lieutenants, in the British forces during the First World War. While many soldiers came out of the war disillusioned with God and with the faith of their fathers, Tolkien and Lewis came out with a deep desire to pursue a spiritual quest, to know God in the midst of an evil world which had just butchered 19 million people in four years of pointless warfare. Tolkien would play a crucial role in Lewis' conversion to Christian faith and Lewis would be the great encourager Tolkien needed to complete both "The Hobbit" and "The Lord of the Rings."

One of the things that Tolkien took out of the war was a profound respect for the common soldier. As an officer, he wasn't allowed to build friendships with the privates or the "batmen" -- servants assigned to look after an officer's gear and attend to his daily needs. But Tolkien observed these men, their courage, their remarkable determination under fire, and he created one of his characters in Lord of the Rings as a reflection of the character he saw in them. He wrote:

My 'Sam Gamgee' is indeed a reflection of the English soldier, of the privates and batmen I knew in the 1914 war, and recognized as so far superior to myself.

Neither Frodo nor Sam helped the other become more self-reliant, more hopeless, more proud or more cruel. What they did was inspire each other to become more hopeful, more trusting, more willing to sacrifice and more courageous in situations of great danger. They had their failings and moments of weakness, for sure, but each time they came back with greater determination and a deeper level of trust and confidence in each other.

When looking for a biblical example of quality friendship, my thoughts went immediately to David and Jonathan, the latter being the son of King Saul, and David being the main threat to Jonathan ultimately following his father to become king of Israel.

In 1 Samuel 17, David, the shepherd boy from Bethlehem, kills the giant Goliath, the champion of Israel's enemies, the Philistines. The next chapter starts like this:

After David had finished talking with Saul, he met Jonathan, the king's son. There was an immediate bond of love between them and they became the best of friends. From that day on Saul kept David with him at the palace and wouldn't let him return home. And Jonathan made a special vow to be David's friend, and he sealed the pact by giving him his robe, tunic, sword, bow and belt. (18:1-4)

In chapter 20, David has been forced to run away from the jealous King Saul who has been trying to kill him. He finds Jonathan and asks him:

"What have I done? What is my crime? How have I offended your father that he is so determined to kill me?"

"That's not true!" Jonathan protested. "I'm sure he's not planning any such thing, for he always tells me everything he's going to do, even the little things."

(1 Samuel 20:1,2)

The two friends arrange together for Jonathan to go and test his father's attitude towards David and to signal David one way or the other - either it's okay to come back to his place at the king's table, or it's dangerous because the king is trying to kill him. Jonathan finds that his father is very angry with David and so he warns his friend and David goes into hiding.

How did Jonathan know that his friend's life was in danger? He had heard his father speak these words:

Do you think I don't know that you want David to be king in your place, shaming yourself and your mother? As long as that son of Jesse is alive, you'll never be king. Now go and get him so I can kill him! (1 Sam. 20:30,31)

Jonathan was the heir to the throne, but he didn't let that come between him and his friend. What he was willing to let go of was power and honour and the prestige of being ruler of all Israel, because he could see that God Himself was with David and that God would make him king. He didn't allow jealousy or pride to come between them and break their friendship. Like Sam did to Frodo, Jonathan was willing to serve David's interests because of his loyal friendship.

When we are born we are totally dependent. There is no way an infant survives in this world without having another person to feed, clothe, protect and nurture him or her. But we are not designed to remain that way, totally dependent on others. During our teenage years we become more and more independent of our parents and more able to detach from what had earlier been sources of security for us. We begin to value the input of peers as much or more than the input of parents — not because our peers are so wise, but because we are learning to think for ourselves and to establish our own values and ways of processing events in our lives. This is a tricky time for parents, who naturally see their children as being wrong about some important things and want to bring correction, but also know that they have to let their nearly adult children sort things out for themselves.

The independence stage lasts into early adulthood, but it's not the ideal, not the destination. We don't grow up so that we can be independent of everyone else, but so that we can learn to develop interdependent relationships that benefit not only ourselves, but those we become friends with, those we work with, those we are neighbours to, etc. The goal of the Christian life is not isolation, but healthy integration, being salt and light in the communities in which we live.

Now, I want to work through an important passage in Ephesians that shows us how this is designed to work in this broader circle of relationship that we call the church. In verses 11-13 of Ephesians 4, we read that Christ has given gifts to the church and that the gifts are people who are to equip others in the church to do God's work and to "build up the body of Christ until we come to such unity in our faith" and such knowledge of God's Son, that we will be fully mature in the Lord. The part I want to look more closely at comes next, beginning in verse 14:

Then we will no longer be like children, forever changing our minds about what we believe because someone has told us something different or because someone has cleverly lied to us and made the lie sound like the truth. Instead, we will hold to the truth in love, becoming more and more in every way like Christ, who is the head of His body, the church. Under His direction, the whole body is fitted together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love. (vv. 14-16)

There are two pictures in this passage: one of a loose collection of individuals who are being tossed from one opinion or set of beliefs to another. The second picture is of a body that is operating together, under the headship of Jesus, each part functioning the way God intended and contributing to the overall plan that God has for us: where each part is growing and the whole body is healthy, growing and full of love. This is the interdependence that produces the fruit of maturity in our lives, and through us, that maturity encourages and builds up every other person that we have relationship with. Let me read that final verse again, this time from the NIV:

From Him (Jesus) the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

This translation emphasizes the degree of connectedness that the body of Christ, the church, has when it is healthy, when it's functioning as it should. We're not all a bunch of loose cannons firing our opinions and ideas here, there and everywhere, but we're united in prayer, in worship, in love and service and in the study and application of God's word to our lives. We are "joined and held together by every supporting ligament," which means that we are held together by our love for Jesus which teaches us to love one another. "Every supporting ligament" tells us that we're all needed and we all have a role to play in the work of building up the family of God in love.

What does this love look like? I think that the image that powerfully works through this passage is the idea of growth or building. "The whole body ... grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." In 1994, we "built" the house that we are still living in today. We broke ground in the middle of June, forms were built, concrete was poured, and soon framers were building onto those foundations and on September 20 we moved in. There were a few minor hiccups along the way. We made some changes in our plans, scrapping a pantry and adding a bay window. But the momentum was always forward. Our efforts, and the efforts of the workers we hired, was towards building the house, making things work, adding, improving. This is the image that needs to guide our relationships in the church. We're going somewhere, we're building something. Our method of building is to incorporate, include, each person with their gifts and their insights and their energy, in the building that we do.

Our job is not to find each other's weaknesses or expose their failings and then to exclude them from the task at hand. Rather, we have to find a way to restore those who get off track, assure them of our love and forgiveness, and help them to pick up the tools of building again. Notice the phrase Paul uses to describe the body of Christ, that it "builds itself up in love". If we are the members of the body, and Scripture assures us that we are, then our task is to be defined by this process of building.

The guiding principle for how we go about this building task is found in verse 15:

We hold to the truth in love (New Living Translation)

Speaking the truth in love (New International Version)

We may have something to say to someone else in the body - how will we say it? We will say it in love. What on earth does that mean? It means that until our heart tells us that we truly desire what is best for the other person and what is best for the whole body of Christ, we won't speak about it at all. When our heart is right, when our emotions that have been triggered by our pride or hurt or selfishness have been laid down, then we can speak words that build instead of words that tear apart and destroy.

And the goal of the building is also found in verse 15:

We will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

Again, let's compare with the New Living Translation that we read earlier:

Becoming more and more in every way like Christ

You see, this was the crazy plan that God had from the beginning. He would call a people to Himself, would bless them and lead them and through them show the whole world what He was like and what living under His care would be like for them. The first people He called were the children of Abraham, the descendants of this man who knew God and who trusted God and who obeyed God. Some of his descendants had the faith of their father, but mostly they didn't, and so they failed to show the world a whole lot about what God is like or about the blessings of obeying Him. Then God sent His Son to offer His life as an atoning sacrifice for our sin, to provide a way for us to join into His bigger family, the family of all -- Jew and Gentile -- who love Him. Again, His desire is that the world would see God through us, not that any one of us are able to display the glory of God to the world, but that through our love, our patience, our forgiveness, our bearing with and holding on to one another, the world could see that there is a better way, the way that God always intended for His creatures to know and to walk in.

So, guess what the devil has attempted to do with relationships in the Christian church for the last 2000 years? He has capitalized on people's insecurities to make them think of others as rivals instead of partners. He has fostered personal ambition over shared vision. He has stirred up dissension over every little doctrinal difference and every personal preference has become a big issue somewhere. That's what the enemy does in order to destroy the church and undermine God's purposes. Anything that we allow to come between us, keeps us from pursuing God's purposes through the church. Any division or mistrust keeps us from showing the world how much God loves and the power of His grace to change our lives. And this takes us back to the issue of independence. Whenever we pull back from the rest of the body of Christ and choose to just do our own thing, to just worship God in our own way and be a Christian apart from being in a church, we reject God's purpose for Jesus' life - and His death.

Dependence is something we come into this world with. We are absolutely dependent on parents or some other caretaker to provide for our needs. Independence is a stepping-stone to maturity, a part of growing up. We have to learn to be independent from people before we can learn to be dependent on God. Can I say that again? We have to learn to be independent from people before we can learn to be dependent on God, or else our dependency will never be transferred from those around us to the Father. But the goal of maturity is not independence, but interdependence. We get hooked back in to meaningful relationships, to caring and building and praying and sharing our hearts, so that we can strengthen the body. When our goal is to bring encouragement and hope and wisdom that will help others grow in Christ, then we've reengaged for the right reasons. We're not codependent, asking people to cover for us so we can remain immature, but we're interdependent, which means that not only are we pursuing Christ with clear focus, but we're helping others to do the same.

I'm very hopeful for this series that our discussion times will be engaging and fruitful. I hope that many of you can participate each week and that you'll find this a helpful time.