

On Monday

I was out for my walk and I had one of those God moments. Walking is one of my favorite things. It is my best prayer time, and I'm usually working out a sermon idea or a paper in my mind and asking God for insight and clarity. During this walk I was thinking about this sermon and playing with different ideas about mothers. I was thinking about my mom and the family I was raised in.

There was a woman up ahead of me pushing a stroller. I could tell that I was going to catch up with her. I didn't want to scare her, so I called out, "I'm coming up on your left, I'm not a stalker or anything."

She looked back at me and laughed. "We saw you coming," she said. "My grandson saw you and said, 'he's all alone. He must be looking for his mom and dad.'"

I looked down at this little boy and said, "as a matter of fact, I was just thinking about my mom and dad."

I walked past this grandma and grandson and then it hit me. It's all right there. God had given me the opening illustration. This little boy hit it right on the head. He noticed two important things.

First, he noticed that I was all alone, and he knew that was not good. Second, he figured that, if I was all alone, I would be looking for my most important relationship. Who else would that be to a child, but mom and dad?

Today we are going to look at the final habit of spiritual formation.

It's called Vital Relationships.

There is a little bit of a danger in Talking about this habit at the end of our year long series.

For one thing it is kind of ironic that we would talk about it right before we enter the summer when people typically scatter off to the cabins and disappear for a while.

It is also dangerous to separate this habit out as if relationships were one of several options that you can work on when you feel like it.

Let me explain.

In our culture we are raised with this idea that each one of us is an individual, self contained, self made person.

It is me, myself, and I. I don't need anybody, and I create my own destiny. That's the American dream, right?

Well, i want to tell you right now, that's a lie.

The truth is that we are all connected in a network of relationships.

Think about it.

Our life begins because of a highly connected relationship. Thump, thump, thump, thump.

Do you know what that is?

That is the first sound you ever heard.

That is the sound of your mother's heart. No matter who you are, you started life in a relationship with your mother.

This is even true for my dad. His mother died giving birth to him.

Even though he never knew her, his very existence is the result of that first relationship.

From that point on our lives are a series of relationships with people and with nature.

Even if you were isolated from all other humans, you will still exist because you have a relationship with the earth and get food, water, and oxygen from it.

This is the core reality of our very nature.

We were created by a relational God to be in relationships. God is the community of the Trinity--Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and we are created in the image of God--male and female.

We are males and females created in the image of God.

If males and females were not in relationship there would be no more people, the human race would go extinct.

If we were not in relationship to the earth, we would die.

The idea of an isolated self is death, it is Hell.

We see this in both our texts today.

The Father is the gardener who plants the vine. Jesus is the vine, in whom we have life, and the Holy Spirit is the sap that makes the fruit of love grow in our lives.

In 1 John he says that we are born of God.

At the heart of both of these passages is the idea of obeying God's commandment to love one another.

That's what it is all about. Mutual love between people

in which both parties give and take and out of which the fruit of God's Kingdom grows.

It's not a matter of *if* we are in relationships, it is a matter of *how* we are relationships.

The question for us today is: ***What kind of relationships do we have and how do we view them?***

We can see from our texts that we have three basic types of vital relationships that form us.

As I quickly go through these types of relationships, I want you to think about your life and see if you have these, and try to name at least one person that fits this description for your life.

The first type of relationship we'll call the Shepherd relationship.

This is a person who pours into you.

In the text we see that this is the Father, who loves the Son. And it is the son who calls and builds into the disciples. We need a person who shepherds us.

I meet every Thursday morning with my Dad.

He is my mentor.

I have professors at school who are trying to help me grow academically.

There are authors that I read who shape me.

I have pastor Mark who I look to for leadership and guidance.

We all need someone to whom we can look to draw us further along on the journey.

Who is it for you?

The second type of relationship is the Shared relationship.

This is that person or group of people with whom you feel a sense of belonging.

Look what Jesus said to his disciples.

He no longer calls them servants, but calls them friends. He calls them to love one another. Jesus knew that the strength of his mission depended upon the disciples, you and me, being in loving community with each other.

What do shared relationships look like?

A primary shared relationship is our spouse.

This is a life partner who is committed for better or worse, richer poorer, sickness and health.

When I look around our community at Grace I see hundreds of stories of vital shared relationships.

This was really accented this year during our times of tragedy. I just think about what happened when Ann Blake and Jim Law died. These were sudden shocks to our system. But, when it happened, in both instances, the shared relationships bore fruit. The kids were surrounded by support. The network of relationships was humming in praise to God.

These relationships are gathered together by the Spirit, around the risen Jesus, to the the glory and praise of the Father.

How is your shared relationship right now?

Who is the person that really knows your heart and is helping you grow in your relationship with God?

Are you spending time with people around God's

Word, and prayer, in hospitality, and service?

Or do you spend effort denying the relationships you have and not investing in them for the Kingdom of God?

The last type of relationship is one that I'm going to call a Sent relationship.

In John 15 the vine bears fruit so that the world can taste it.

In 1 John it talks about “conquering the world” that means encountering the destructive forces of the world and overcoming them with God’s love. There is an outward focus to both of these passages.

The church does not exist so that we can be comfortable with each other.

God sends us into the world to be in relationship with all people.

One of the greatest ways to grow spiritually is to reach out across the distance to people who are different than you. This can take on a million different shapes.

It might be like our adult leaders of catechism groups that have committed to spending time with middle school students as mentors to them.

It might be walking down the block and introducing yourself to the neighbor who is still a stranger to you. Maybe having neighbors over for dinner.

It might be intentionally taking public transportation or shopping in a different grocery store to meet people from different places.

It might be meeting with people who are in great need and who can’t help themselves; whether they are hungry, or in need of shelter, or just need someone to talk to.

Maybe it is taking time to listen to the person who would normally be considered your enemy and seeing them as a human being, created in the image of God.

What if we thought about all those spaces where we encounter the other and see them as opportunities to ask, “What is God doing here, and how can I participate in it?”

Look what John said in the 1 John passage.

“for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith.”

We conquer the hatred and pain and division in the world by being the love of God in our sent relationships.

How are your sent relationships? Do you see God at work in those places in your life?

Each of these types of relationships are vital to our spiritual formation.

I want you to see one more thing that happens in these relationships.

They are dynamic.

They are always changing.

Look what Jesus said in John 15. He said,

“I no longer call you servants, but I call you friends.”

The more time they invested in these relationships, the more they grew and shifted. They were drawn in closer, and the intensity of the love deepened.

I leave us with two challenges:

1. Think about your own life. Which of these relationships needs to be reimagined for you? What conversation do you need to have to reconnect or rekindle a vital relationship?
2. As we go off into the summer, what if we reimagined the spaces to which we retreat. What if we thought of them not as NOT going to church, but places where God has sent us to participate in what God is doing? What if we shared our God stories on Facebook over the summer?

No matter where you are right now.

No matter how alone you might feel right now. Remember this.

You are in relationship with God.

You are born of God.

Born in the love of God, for the love of God, and there are people all around you who want to share God's love with you.

Let's pray.