

Date: March 14, 2021

Scripture: John 3:16

Title: RELATIONSHIPS

Sir Ernest Shackleton was a celebrated explorer during the first part of the 20th century. In his writings he describes some of the tasks he and his companions faced in preparing to return from an expedition to the South Pole. They knew they would have to leave some possessions behind. He writes that he was profoundly impressed with the things his companions considered important. For example, they took their money out their pockets and left it behind. Even food knapsacks they threw away. What they didn't leave behind were pictures of loved ones and letters from home. These they carried with them.

Today we want to talk about love, the kind of love that caused those explorers to leave behind material things, clinging to pictures and letters from their loved ones.

Our text is the best-loved verse in all the Bible, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

I know, that's not the kind of love, we hear so much about nowadays. The word love, is used and misused, in so many ways. After all, "Love. It's What Makes a Subaru a Subaru." What does that mean? The word love has been abused in so many ways, so let's use another word for our purposes today, relationship. The older I get, the more convinced I've become, that the only thing in life, which really counts, is relationships.

Money, what's money? We need enough to meet our daily needs. But, when someone says, "I wouldn't take a million dollars for my child," usually he or she means it! Money means nothing, in comparison to the people we love.

Success, what's success? Often, the most miserable person in the world, is the one at the top of the heap. So what if, everybody in the world, pats you on the back, and tells you what a great person you are. What's that, compared to having someone very close to you, very committed to you, whisper, "I love you" and mean it. Let me say it again. The only thing in life, that really counts, is relationships.

There are three very special relationships, I would like to focus on today. **The first, is the relationship we have with those closest to us.**

It's great and wonderful to love, and to be loved! Love is, what makes the world go round. How long has it been, since you really told those closest to you, that you love them? Love is all that really matters! Love them, while there's still time.

A young family had a little three years old girl. They also had a brand-new baby boy. That can be a difficult adjustment. An insurance salesman was at their house and he asked their little girl, "Do you like your new baby brother." She answered, "Oh no, I don't like him." Well, the parents were horrified, but they hadn't given her time to finish her sentence. She said, "I don't like him, I love him."

Even at an early age, that little one, is sensitive to what really counts in life, our relationship with those closest to us.

We get so busy, working ourselves to an early grave, so we can give our families all the material blessings of life, when all they really need or want, is us. That's the one nice thing about the sequestering we've had to do, because of the pandemic. Hopefully, it's given families an opportunity to reconnect.

But, there's another family we don't talk about, like we should! It's the human family in which we all belong. Family, includes everyone on earth.

After the death of author F. Scott Fitzgerald, some of his friends went through many of his papers. What they found were a number of unfinished plots. One of these plots had to do with the members of an estranged family, who inherited a large house. In order to take possession of the house, they had to prove, they could live happily in it, together. We don't know if they were able to keep the house or not. After all, the story was never finished. I know some families, who wouldn't make it.

But, think about that for a few minutes. Humanity is in much the same situation. We all have inherited a house, this wonderful earth. It's a big house, we've become a big family. Billions of us. We're a very diverse family, Chinese, Japanese, Africans, Indians, Russians, Europeans, North and South Americans. We've inherited this wonderful house, and it's our task to learn to live in it together.

It's tragic, that the human family, has been torn through the ages, by so much hatred and violence? If only, we realized, we are all children of God.

Dr. Fred Craddock says, "The Rabbis used to tell a story of the exodus. God was very busy at the time of the exodus, and so God appointed a committee of angels to take care of parting the Red Sea. The angels, using the power that God gave them, parted the waters of the sea, so the children of Israel could walk through it. Then came the Egyptians. So the angels waited, and when the Egyptians reached the middle of the sea, the angels caused the waters, to close and drown the entire Egyptian army. Triumphantly the angels shouted and cheered, "We got 'em, we got 'em, we got 'em."

Then Craddock says God looked over the banister of heaven and said to that committee of angels, "You're no longer in my service."

The angels protested, "But we got them."

And God said, "Don't you know? The Egyptians are also my children."

Fred Craddock adds, "Who tells that story? Jewish Rabbis."

We are all children of God. Regardless of our skin color. Regardless of our ethnic background or nationality. Or our religion.

It's like a powerful story that Michael Lindval tells about a friend of his named Fuad Bahman. Fuad was a Christian pastor in Beirut, Lebanon after the last Arab-Israeli war. In 1983, the Israeli army invaded Lebanon. There was a rumor that Israel was planning a prolonged siege of Beirut, and so members of Fuad's church began to buy up all the canned food they could in order to survive. They were hoarding life's essentials, just as many did when the coronavirus first hit this country.

Well, their fears were justified. West Beirut was totally cut-off. And so the official body of the church met to decide how to distribute the food they had purchased. Two proposals were put on the table. The first proposal was to distribute food to the

church members first, then other Christians secondly, and last, if any food was left, to their Muslim neighbors.

The second proposal was different. First, food would be given to their Muslim neighbors, then to other Christians, finally, if there was any left over, to church members.

The meeting lasted six hours. “It ended when an older, quiet, much respected Elder, a woman, stood up and said, ‘If we don’t demonstrate the love of Christ in this place, who will?’” And guess what? The second motion passed. They distributed food to their Muslim neighbors first.

I truly wonder how many Christian congregations in the United States would be so magnanimous. “If we don’t demonstrate the love of Christ in this place, who will?” That would be a good motto for the church today.

That’s the second family to which we all belong, the human family. **But, there’s a third relationship that’s more important than all the others, that’s our relationship with God.** 1 John 4:10 says, “This is love, not that we loved God, but that God loved us, and sent God’s Son, as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” What a powerful sentence: “not that we loved God, but that God loved us.”

It’s like a story that Webb Garrison tells in his book, *White House Ladies*, about Lucy Hayes, wife of Rutherford B. Hayes, the 19th president of the United States.

In 1864, Lucy Hayes received news that her husband, who was a colonel in the Union army in the Civil War, was killed in action. But, that same day, a telegram arrived announcing that Hayes was not dead, only badly injured during a battle in Virginia.

Lucy Hayes didn’t know what to think. Was he dead or alive? Communication lines were unreliable at that time in our history. Whether he was dead or alive, Lucy was determined to bring her husband home. So she set out on a journey, through dangerous territory, to find him.

She searched bloody, scorched battlefields, and crude hospitals, until finally, two weeks after she left home, Lucy found her husband, injured but alive. When he campaigned for the presidency a few years later, Rutherford B. Hayes told sympathetic audiences, of his loving wife, who risked her own life “wandering all over Kingdom Come, in search of her husband, only to be surprised, finding him alive and kicking.”

In the same way, imagine God “wandering all over Kingdom Come” in order to bring us home, into a loving relationship with God. “This is love, not that we loved God, but that God loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” Then the author of I John adds these crowning words, “Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.”

That’s what life is all about, loving relationships with those closest to us, with the rest of God’s children scattered all over the world, and with the God who created us and sustains us, with God’s love today.

Chances are, before you’re through with this life, you’ll face many hardships and much distress. Have you developed a relationship with God, that will give you strength to bear any burden, endure any heartache, be victorious over every evil?

God is extravagant Love, and God Loves us. Our lesson for today proclaims, “God so loved the world . . .”. Here’s the most amazing thing about the Christian faith. It’s the message that the Creator God, who brought into being everything that is, or was, or will ever be, wants to have an intimate relationship with every person on earth. It makes no difference where you come from, who you are, what you’ve done. God wants to be closer to you than any friend, any associate, any spouse you’ve ever known. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

God wants an intimate, personal relationship with you. All you have to do is, invite God into your heart. So, invite God into your heart today and then Trust, Believe, and have an Active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.