

Sunday, May 8, 2005

A Sermon Preached by
The Reverend Dr. Thomas K. Tewell



Relationships R Us

Luke 8:19-21

Will You Pray With Me? *Gracious and loving God, in the silence of this moment, pour through me the gift of preaching. Many of us have mothers with us here today and we're ready to take them out to brunch, lunch or dinner. Others have a mother who is deceased, perhaps for many years. Some in this congregation come with many hopes and dreams this day. But whether we are children whose mother is living or not living, or are mothers ourselves, or whether we are single, older or younger, please speak to us a fresh, crisp word about how to so structure the relationships of our life that we might be whole people, liberated and free to serve you. To that end may this message truly, O God, be your Living Word to us. We pray with anticipation and confidence in the strong name of Jesus, the risen and the reigning Christ. Amen.*

Jesus said, "A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another as I have loved you. By this, all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another." This morning I want to ask you a very important question. What lessons of life did you learn from your mother? If you're going for Mother's Day dinner today it might be a question to discuss over the dinner table. I asked that question to our staff this past week and some of the responses were humorous and some were poignant. One man said, "Actually my mother made it possible for me to learn how to cook." "Oh, so your mother was a terrific chef?" I asked him. "Oh no, she couldn't cook at all. That's how she made it possible for me to learn how to cook!" Someone else said, "My mother taught me to pray. In fact, in the moments of my life, when I wasn't sure how I was going to make it, I knew that I made it because my mother was praying for me." Someone else said, "From my mother I learned unconditional love and I learned that true unconditional love is costly."

I've been thinking about that question all week. And frankly I realize that one of the things my mother taught me, and I've kept with me all my life, is how to

"...She struggles with the fact that if she never measured up to what her mother wanted her to be, how could she ever measure up to who God wants her to be? Maybe you struggle with it too."

spell love. She spelled it T-I-M-E. My mother gave me her presence, her time. Hazel Tewell was one of those old-fashioned moms who was always ready with a glass of Hawaiian punch, a snack, and a listening ear when I came home from school. Sometimes I didn't stay long, maybe just a few minutes, before I changed my clothes and got on my bike for baseball, football or basketball practice, or to play with some friends. But it didn't matter how long a time it was – she was there and somehow she communicated to me that those moments together were among the most important things in her world. She taught me that quantity time is necessary for quality time.

I don't remember most of what we talked about, but I do remember a few really quality conversations with my mom. And I know it took quantity time to get that quality time. You can't rush listening, just as you can't rush mourning, and you can't rush a celebration. There are some things you just can't rush, and my mom took time. If Dr. Phil were here now and had a microphone and walked around the congregation asking each of you, "What did your mother teach you. What life lesson did you learn from your mother?" I know there would be many wonderful lessons. I know that a number of us have learned from positive things from our mothers. My mother has been dead for 15 years and I still miss her, I still can picture her.

But on this Mother's Day, can we be honest enough to say, as Rev. Jan Ammon said so beautifully in her prayer this morning, "It's a mixed blessing day." Some of you in this congregation always thought you'd be married and that you'd be a mother – but life didn't

work out that way. Some are very grateful and thankful for their mothers. Others, really good people, were or are always in conflict with their mothers. Some have resentment toward their mother because they never were able to measure up to her expectations. There is a woman, a long-term member of our congregation, who remembers trying all her life to measure up to what her mother wanted her to be. And she never heard her mother say, "Well done." This brilliant woman always felt as if she was a B- or a C+ at best.

Her view of theology is that it is probably impossible to please God. She talks about the judgment of God, the wrath of God, she fears God in the worst sense of the term. It wasn't until 1965 when she heard Bryant Kirkland speak about grace from this pulpit, that she dared to believe that a person is saved by grace, not by works. She still struggles with it theologically. She never measured up to what her mother wanted her to be. How could she ever measure up to who God wants her to be? Maybe you struggle with it too. We know this Mother's Day is a mixed-blessing day – a wonderful day, and yet a day of mystery and some difficult relationships.

I want to lift up that passage in Luke 8:19-21 that Dr. Tisdale read for us a moment ago, and perhaps take it apart a little bit. It's a mysterious scripture. Jesus comes across differently in it from what you would expect. And out of this mysterious scripture on this poignant day, I want to lift three spiritual principles that apply to us all – married or single, rich or poor, old or young or whether or not our mother or mentor is living today. These principles are applicable to all human relationships. But listen carefully because these principles could change your life.

Principle #1:

Family Relationships Are Seedbeds for Unrealistic Expectations

In Luke 18:19-21 we read that Jesus' mother and brothers went to see him. They went to the home where Jesus was teaching. His message was spellbinding! The crowds grew so large that they were spilling into the areas outside the house. Jesus' mother and brothers were not able to get inside and they let it be known that they are outside and expecting to see their son and brother.

It's what they expect. The word spreads, Jesus' mother and brothers were here. When Jesus finished teaching, one of the rabbis said to him, "Master, your mother and brothers are here. They expect to see you." Jesus' response is a very interesting one. We might expect that He would do what he can to meet their expectations. But Jesus said, "My mother and brothers are those who

hear God's word and do it." And Jesus refused to meet his family's expectations.

In my early preparations for this sermon last summer and earlier in the year, I examined all the passages in the New Testament that have something to do with Jesus' mother or Jesus' brothers. There are a lot of them, and it's a good exercise. It's interesting that Mary is so faithful. You remember the angel Gabriel appeared to her and told Mary that she would conceive and bear a son and that He'd be the Son of God, the Son of the Most High and he'd be the Messiah. Mary pondered that in her heart.

When Jesus was twelve years old, he broke away from the family. After searching frantically for him, they finally found him in the Synagogue. If one of your children has ever been lost, you know the frenzy they were feeling. When they finally found Him in the Temple, they said, "Jesus, didn't you know that we were worried sick about you?" And Jesus responded, "I had to be about my Father's business." Mary pondered that in her heart, too. And as she watched him teach and heal and preach she pondered all of those things too. Finally when she saw Him on the cross, she must have wondered, "Was I a fool to believe all this? Or is the cross still a part of the plan?" Mary is Jesus' mother, and she's doing some very hard pondering.

We are told in John 7, that Jesus' brothers did not believe in him as the Messiah. And in the gospel of Mark we learn that Jesus' brothers were worried and went to rescue him because they feared for his safety, and for his sanity. Because people were saying, "He's mad teaching like this," Jesus' brothers began to think that perhaps He was mad! Notice again that family relationships are seedbeds for unrealistic expectations, and Jesus refuses to meet all the expectations that his family members had for Him. Have any of you ever put a family member, friend or other person on a pedestal? In our culture today, it's a common thing we do. We place our mothers, fathers, friends on pedestals – and when we do that, we put expectations on them that no one could ever fulfill.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who died in Nazi Germany, was martyred for his faith. Bonhoeffer said, "It is not until we face our disenchantments and disillusionments with the Christian community that we can really experience true, mature community. Anyone who loves the dream of the Christian community more than the people with whom they're in community, destroys the community. Charlie Brown of the *Peanuts* comic strip says "I love humanity, it's just people I can't stand." It's one thing to love people in theory, but it's quite another matter to really love the people with whom we live and work. And sometimes we have this ideal view of what family life is going to be like.

A young couple came to see me – it was their final premarital counseling session. They were going to be married in two weeks, and they were at each other’s throats! They had been yelling at each other in the hallway outside of my office before I brought them in for this idyllic premarital counseling session. There they sat, obviously very upset with one another, in fact they were steaming. It was a very important issue that caused it all – who was going to sit with whom at the rehearsal dinner. I mean, this is big stuff! They were fighting over this, and I was trying to calm them down. After a few minutes the young man leaned over and said to me, “Tom, don’t worry about us – in two weeks we’ll be married and all our problems will be over.” Buster, your problems are just beginning!

Sometimes we have an unrealistic, idealistic illusion of family. I say this respectfully, but no mother could ever meet all of our needs. No child could ever meet all of our needs. No spouse, no sibling, no friend could ever meet all our needs. We’ve got to face that this is an illusion and realize that no person can possibly live up to his or her press notices. It’s good that we face this illusion, because it is only when we arrive at this realization that the other person is free to be him or herself. Families are wonderful, but they’re often seedbeds of unrealistic and unhealthy expectations.

Principle #2:

Make God, and God Alone, the Number One Priority of Your Life by Hearing God’s Word and Doing It

Now what is God’s Word? Well, Jesus says in John 13, “Love one another as I have loved you. By this all people will know you’re my disciples if you have love for one another.” Jesus says, “The most important criteria I’m looking for in my disciples is love.” In I Corinthians 13, we read “Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful. Love is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way. Love doesn’t rejoice in wrong. It rejoices in the right.” Can I be honest with you and say that when Jesus Christ talked about following him he used contrast metaphors? Sometimes we find these metaphors very difficult to understand, such as, “You must be born again to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” And we think you must go into your mother’s womb a second time. What Jesus is saying is, “There must be a rebirth of the soul.”

The great scientist, philosopher and astronomer, Copernicus was the first one who realized that the sun does not revolve around the earth and that the other planets do not revolve around the earth. He found that there was something different in this system, this solar system, that actually it is the earth and the planets that

revolve around the sun. That’s a whole new way of seeing things – the Copernican revolution.

Being a Christian offers us a Copernican revolution of the soul. If you haven’t had a conversion experience in Christ, you can think, “Everything revolves around me – it’s all about me.” The family exists so that the sun, the solar system, other people, the other planets all revolve around me and my desires and my wishes. When you become a Christian you realize that we revolve, in a Copernican revolution of the soul, around the SON. Our job is putting Jesus Christ first, and when Jesus Christ becomes first, we free other people to be themselves. We’re never disillusioned by them. We don’t put them on a pedestal. We realize that God is #1. And once we realize that God is #1 then we’re free to hear this word about love and we’re free to do it.

I hate to bring this up, but the New York Yankees are in last place. I hate that! I’m a Yankee fan, I’ve been a Yankee fan for years, but the Yankees have the highest payroll in the history of baseball. Some teams have a \$25 million payroll for the whole team. The Yankees’ team payroll is over \$200 million. Almost as much as the payroll for all of the pastors at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church! Even with this phenomenal payroll they’re losing game after game, and a reporter went to Derek Jeter, the captain, who has won four World Series rings. He said, “Derek, your team has all these superstars. They have won batting titles, and Cy Young Awards, and most valuable player awards – you’ve got all the superstars. Why aren’t you on the road to another championship? Why aren’t you winning games? What’s the reason for this losing streak?”

Derek Jeter shook his head and said, “Superstars don’t win championships, **teams win championships**. Superstars can contribute to championships if they will sacrifice for the good of the team. No superstar has ever won a championship. It’s only when the superstar sacrifices his or her gifts for the good of the team, and supports the others and encourages them, that the team can win. The truth of the matter is the 2005 version of the New York Yankees is not yet a team. Everyone is playing as if it’s ‘all about me and my statistics.’ We have to decide if we want to become a team.”

There are many families that have never become a team – it all revolves around mom, or it all revolves around dad, or it all revolves around the kids, or it all revolves around somebody. On this Mother’s Day, the greatest gift you could give your family, and your friends, is to make God your #1 priority by hearing God’s Word about love and doing something about it – doing what love demands. Sacrifice for the good of the family, and for the good of others. When you put God #1 and your life revolves around the solar system of God, and the SON, Jesus Christ is the center, you free

the people in your life to be themselves.

Principle #3:

When You Put God #1 in Your Life, You Are Free to Bless People

Have you been blessed by your mother, by your father, by a sibling? We were put on the face of the earth to be a conduit of blessing to other people. That's what we're doing here – we are here to bless other people. The Bible says, "We are blessed in order to be a blessing to others." But so many people don't realize they're blessed to be a blessing to others. So often we try to please our mothers and measure up to what she wanted us to be – but we never make it. And as a result we feel as if we are not a blessed person. So instead of being a blessing to others we often withhold God's blessing.

Be very sure that this very week, every person in this sanctuary is going to have an opportunity. An opportunity to either curse people or bless people. This sermon today is important stuff because the key to blessing someone is in realizing that God is #1 in our lives. And when God is #1 we get from God the blessing with which to bless others. If we do not get that blessing from God, we won't be a conduit of God's blessing to others and the *Good News* of the gospel. God's blessing is for all people. We are all children of God, as we come to know Jesus Christ. That's what the Christian gospel is about.

Let me tell you about two boys, each 12 years old. One was cursed, the other was blessed. They were Roman Catholic altar boys named Josef and Peter John. Josef Brose lived in Yugoslavia. He was an altar boy, and he was proud of it. The sanctuary was packed on a Sunday morning. Josef took the crystal cruet filled with communion wine and marched proudly up the altar steps. As he got to the top step he tripped, dropped the crystal cruet and watched as it smashed into 1,000 pieces. Embarrassment doesn't even begin to describe what Josef felt. He knelt before the priest and said, "Father, forgive me, I have sinned." The priest looked at Josef Brose and said, "Get out. Get out of this church and don't ever come back again." That is a true story. And sadly, young Josef Brose walked out of the church, and he never came back, and he never darkened the door of a church for the rest of his whole life. When he was an adult, he changed his name. It's a name you know well. He changed his name to Marshall Tito, and under his reign, hundreds of thousands, even millions of people were slaughtered.

Now we follow young Peter John in Peoria, Illinois. The Roman Catholic Church was filled to overflowing, with the bishop in attendance, as he walked down the center aisle with the crystal cruet of communion wine.

He was excited, his parents were there, everyone was proud of him. But like Josef Brose, he got to the top step and tripped, and dropped the crystal cruet which smashed into a million pieces. "What was the bishop going to think," Peter John thought to himself. Without missing a beat, the bishop got up, went to the microphone and said, "Worshippers, our altar boy, Peter John, has given us a wonderful example of God's redemption and grace. Is there anyone of us who hasn't had an embarrassing experience, a disillusioning experience, or a shattering experience?"

"Peter John, thank you for giving us this illustration of redemption and the gospel. For when our lives are broken apart in a million pieces, there is a God who can bring resurrection out of crucifixion. Peter John, the truth of the matter is that God is going to put your broken pieces back together and make you a stronger altar boy, a stronger Catholic and a stronger Christian. And let me confess my own sins, when I was an altar boy, I too dropped a crystal cruet." Then he looked directly at Peter John, and said something the young boy would never forget, "Peter John, I dropped a crystal cruet, you dropped a crystal cruet, maybe you'll be a bishop just like me." And he gave a big wink. And Peter John did become a bishop – a recognized, world-renowned bishop. Some of you are old enough to remember the name Peter John Fulton Sheen. He was the first great Catholic television evangelist seen by many millions of people on Tuesday evenings in the 1950s.

One was blessed, the other cursed. The greatest gift you could give the people of your life is to take them off the pedestal, and have your life revolve around the system of Jesus the Christ. Make Him #1 and when you do he's the only one who can meet the deepest hungers and assuage the deepest thirsts of our souls. When you do that all the other relationships of life fall into their proper place. Then we are free to love one another as Jesus has loved us. "By this all people will know that we are Jesus' disciples if we have love for one another." On Mother's Day, and every day don't ever forget it. Amen.

*Dr. Tewell's sermons are available on CD or cassette tape.
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