

March 14, 2021

Texts: Numbers 21: 4-9; John 3: 14-21

Title: “Relationships that Matter”

Sir Ernest Shackleton was a famous explorer during the first part of the 20th century. In his writings he describes some of the tasks he and his companions faced during their attempts to get to the South Pole. On one occasion it became necessary for them to leave as many possessions behind as possible. He writes that he was impressed with the things his companions considered important, as opposed to what they threw away. 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 our subject is love—the kind of love that caused those explorers to cling to pictures and letters from their loved ones above all else. Our gospel reading includes the best-loved verse in all the Bible, John 3:16: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever shall believeth in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

I saw a commercial that said, “Love. It's What Makes a Subaru a Subaru.” Now what kind of love is that, I wonder? The word “love” has been abused in so many ways, so let's use another word for our purposes today—the word “relationship”. The older I get the more convinced I become that the only thing in life that really counts is relationships. Money? Of course we need some to meet our daily needs but money means nothing in comparison to the people we love.

How about “Success”? Some of the most miserable people in the world are those who are at the top of the heap (lonely). So, 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 tell you that they love you, and mean it.

So there are three very special relationships, the **first of which is the relationship we have with those closest to us**. How often do we tell people close to us that we love them? You know, that’s all that really matters to them. Love the people closest to you while there’s still time.

A young family had a little girl three years old. They also had a brand-new baby boy. You know what a difficult adjustment that can be. An insurance salesman was at their house and he asked their little girl, “Do you like your new baby brother.” “Oh no,” she answered, “I don’t like him.”

Well, the parents were horrified, but they hadn’t given her time to finish her sentence. “I don’t like him,” she said, “I love him.” Even at that early age that little one is sensitive to what really counts in life.

But there’s another family that we don’t talk about like we should--and that’s the total human family to which we all belong. That family includes everyone on this earth! After the death of author F. Scott Fitzgerald, some of his friends went through many of his papers. What they found was a number of unfinished stories. One of them had to do with the members of an estranged family who inherited a large house. In order to take possession of the house, there

was one requirement--they had to prove they could live in it together, happily. We don't know if they were able to do that or not. The the story was unfinished. I know some families that would have a rough time of it.

But think about that for a few moments. Humanity is in much the same situation. We've all inherited a house--this wonderful earth. It's a **big** house, we're a big family. Billions of us. And we're a very diverse family in so many ways. Our task, of course, is to learn to live in it together. We've got a long ways to go on that, don't we? But won't get there if we don't see each other as part of the same family.

Of course it's tragic that the human family's been torn since the beginning by so much hatred and violence? It's like a story that Michael Lindval tells about a friend of his named Fuad Bahman. Fuad was a Christian pastor in Beirut, Lebanon during several of the wars that country suffered through.

The Israeli army invaded Lebanon. There was a rumor that they were 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 it just as many did when the coronavirus first hit us one year ago.

When the war came, their part of the city was totally cut-off. The church board met to decide how to distribute the food. Two proposals were offered. The first was to distribute food to the church members first, then other Christians second, and last—if any food was left—to their Muslim neighbors.

The second proposal was just the opposite. First, food would be given to their

Muslim neighbors, then to other Christians, finally, if there was any left over, to church members. The discussion went on for a long time. “It ended when one of the elders stood up and said, ‘If we don’t demonstrate the love of Christ in this place, who will?’” And guess what? They distributed food to their Muslim neighbors first. “If we don’t demonstrate the love of Christ in this place, who will?” Not a bad motto for us to use today.

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

Here’s the most amazing thing about the Christian faith. It’s the message that God almighty, our Creator, 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 anyone you’ve ever known. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” All you have to do is open the door of your heart and let Him in. Amen.