

“Redefining Relationship”

Acts 10:44-48
John 15:9-17

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Perhaps you have heard of a symbiotic relationship. We usually think of it as organisms who depend on each other for life. For instance, the plant world produces much needed oxygen for the animal world and in turn the animal world produces carbon dioxide which the plants use for food and in turn produces food for animals which in turn produces food for the plant world.

However, this is only one of three kinds of symbiotic relationships. This one being called a mutualistic relationship. The other two are parasitic and commensal. Symbiotic simply means living with or in close proximity. For instance, we are in close proximity to the people who live in this neighborhood, but it doesn't necessarily mean we are mutually beneficial to each other. We are in proximity of the lake, but it doesn't necessarily mean that we need each other to survive. We could probably get along without it.

The mutualistic relationship is what we usually think of when we think of symbiotic. We like this kind of relationship. I scratch your back you scratch mine. It's a win, win relationship. It's a comfortable relationship. It means that one person does not make a sacrifice for the other because you know you will be paid back. For the most part this feels like a very positive thing. It seems to be at the heart of community. We all help and we all benefit. In a perfect world, this works great.

When I was in business, my coworkers and I would go out for lunch or dinner and rather than splitting the checks, one person would often just lay down his card and pay the whole bill knowing that the others would pay for him in the future. It worked just fine until someone in the group never seemed to pick up any of the checks. He might say that he would get you next time, but next time never seemed to happen. We have a word for this: parasite.

Organisms living in symbiosis, close by each other, could have a parasitic relationship. This means one organism uses the resources of another without benefiting the other. In fact, it takes away from the health of the other. One gains and one loses. These relationships don't last. Either the host kills or removes the parasite or the parasite kills the host.

Perhaps all of us on some level have been in a parasitic relationship, a friendship or maybe even a marriage where one person sucks the life out of you. The person is all need and no give. We have probably all been the parasite at one time or another. We all go through needy times in our lives when we feel that we have very little to give.

I have no doubt that there are people in the world that are shameless parasites. That will take all day long and not think twice about it. Perhaps it's a survival instinct.

Perhaps its laziness. Perhaps they are just wired like that. However, most people do not want to be parasites. They don't want to be a drain on anyone. They want very much to contribute to the relationship, but they cannot or perhaps feel that they cannot.

I see this a lot when we have members who go through prolonged health problems. They have to be waited on and they hate it. It wears down their self-worth. Often what happens is they withdraw from relationship until they feel they can contribute. Or if it is a permanent problem, they may withdraw from relationship permanently.

As a church we must be careful of both mutualistic relationships and parasitic relationships. If we require that all of our members be able to have a mutualistic relationship with us, then a lot of people will slip through the cracks. Many churches get caught in this trap. The evidence is usually in the make-up of the congregation. They would all be of the same socio-economic class. You've gotta pay to play. If a person begins to receive more than give, we tire quickly of them. And eventually we label that person as a parasite and they are not welcome because our survival instinct kicks it.

But there is a third type of relationship called commensal. It is a Latin word that broken apart "com" and "mensal" means sharing a table, or sharing of food. It is a relationship where one benefits and the other is not harmed as a result. In other words, a need is being met, but not at the expense of the other. It involves a choice. One chooses to share. There is no taking. There is only giving. A gift is not an expense.

This is the relationship that God initiates with us. In our scripture from John, Jesus tells his disciples that as the Father loves him, that he loves them, and they are to love each other in the same way. God loves us first through Jesus.

God doesn't need us. God doesn't need a mutualistic relationship with us. God is complete. However, he chooses to love us, not because he needs something back from us, but simply out of his free choice to love, to share his table with us. It's a commensal relationship. This redefines love for us.

We so often will only love those that can love us back in the way we want to be loved back. Or we need a relationship to make us complete. If our relationships are only based on need, then what happens when we stop needing a person? We dump them. The relationship is over. If one needs and the other doesn't, it becomes parasitic. One begins to drain the other of their health and happiness.

However, if we love like Christ loves, like God loves, then our love will simply be a gift, never expecting anything in return. And isn't this the kind of love we all long to receive. We all want to be loved out of choice, out of preference, not because the other person needs something from us. That kind of love is a burden. That kind of loves needs something back to be complete. If we believe that God needs something back from us in exchange for his love then the relationship becomes a burden. Church work becomes a burden. Tithing becomes a burden. But that's not how God loves us.

In the novel *The Shack*, the character who represents God the Father, who calls herself Papa, tells the main character Mack that she has always been especially fond of him. But later she says the same thing about his father who he had hated all his life. And she also said the same thing about his daughter, who had been abducted and killed. But what was beyond all his comprehension was that she said the same thing about the killer. I am especially fond of him. It's not that she excused what he did on any level. And it's not that there will not be justice. It's that God loves every person as if that person were God's favorite and God does it out of choice, out of his desire for each of us.

It's a hard thing for us to accept. We want the especially fond love of God, but often feel like if God has that for others who we deem unworthy of it, we feel like it diminishes in some way the love God has for us. We may say God loves everyone because he has to love everyone. But that is not true. God does not have or need to love anyone.

God's love for us is out of choice. God wants to love us. God desires to love us. There's no neediness in it. God has an infiniteness capacity to love, to be especially fond. And God's love is given freely. We are not parasites to God, we can't take from God because all is given. You can't take what is given.

This can all be summed up in Jesus' words, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Jesus' life was not taken from him, it was given to the world, even those that nailed him to a cross. It was given. The life of Christ is a shared meal, a shared table. And through this gift, we have life. We have everything we need. And because we have everything we need from God's love in Christ, we don't have to spend all our energy taking what we need from the world, from each other. We don't need mutually beneficial relationships because we are completed by God's love. We become free just like God to love out of choice. We too can share our table with others. We too can love with no expectation of receiving anything back. We too can lay down even our lives for others. And yet our true eternal lives will not be diminished because we have the infinite, freely given, commensal love of our God.

Christ shares his table with us. There is nothing that we can do to pay for what is on it. You can't give God anything he needs. But you can give God what he wants: yourself. God wants you and he wants you to love others in the same way.