

GRACE-FILLED RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are tough! Family relationships, marital relationships, relationships with friends, relationships with co-workers, even casual encounters at the store or on the highway. I mean, how do you respond when someone cuts in line ahead of you or nearly runs you off the road?

Jesus talks about relationships in today's Gospel reading. He is talking about how he divides family members from one another. "From now on," he says, "five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

There are so many things which divide people - including religion. In the Gospel reading for today, Jesus is just telling it like it is. He does cause division. In listening to what else Jesus says, I don't think this is what he wants, but it is what happens. When it comes to Jesus, you cannot be indifferent. Either you are for him or you are against him. And that divides people.

Relationships are tough. We don't have to have much experience in life before we realize how challenging relationships can be. Does Jesus have any help for us?

The words Jesus says in today's Gospel reading aren't the only words he says about relationships. He has much more to say and he has much help to offer.

What Jesus teaches us is this: grace is the key! Just as grace unlocks our relationship with God, so grace is a powerful tool in our relationships with people.

Grace means unconditional love. Over and over again Jesus demonstrated unconditional love as he ate with sinners and befriended people society rejected. Unconditional love does not mean approval of another's actions; it does mean accepting and loving that person, in spite of those actions. When Jesus went to Jericho a notorious cheat and scoundrel climbed a sycamore tree to see him pass by. Jesus stopped at the tree and said, "Zacchaeus, come on down, for I must stay at your house today." That's unconditional love. Nothing helps a relationship more than unconditional love.

When people relate to one another, there is bound to be friction. No relationship runs smoothly all the time. There will be bumps in the road. Words will be said, actions will be done, someone gets ticked off, someone gets hurt. There will be misunderstandings and mis-communication. And then the relationship is strained or maybe even broken.

That's why grace is so important in relationships. Grace means forgiveness. And that is what is needed when relationships are strained or broken. Jesus tells a story about a son who showed disrespect for his father by asking for his share of the inheritance while the father was still living. He then took the money and left town. When he squandered everything and found himself broke, he returned to the father to ask for a job. The father, however, forgave his son. He welcomed him home, accepted him. Forgiveness heals relationships.

Once, Peter came to Jesus and said, "how many times do I have to forgive? As many as seven times?" And Jesus said, "Not seven times, but seventy times seven." In other words, over and over and over again. Healthy relationships require lots of forgiveness - over and over again - just like God forgives us.

Grace means working hard not to give offense. It is so easy to offend another - to say something or to do something that causes anger or resentment or wounded feelings. When grace is the focus, extra effort is made to avoid giving offense.

I have also come to believe that taking offense can be just as much a problem. Grace teaches us to be patient, to withhold judgment, to listen, to try to understand, to put the best construction on what the other person has said or done, rather than immediately taking offense.

Jesus said that when someone sins against you, go and talk with that person. If the two of you can't work it out, Jesus said take someone with you. And if that doesn't work, involve even more. Communication is vital in relationships. Not in a spirit of telling the other person off, or putting the other person down, but in a spirit of grace, of unconditional love, of forgiveness, of seeking to restore the relationship.

Relationships are valuable - extremely valuable! They don't just happen. They require grace - lots of grace. Like the grace of Jesus when he gave his life on the cross so that you and I can have a wholesome relationship with God.