

Sermon for Sunday, February 25, 1973 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"LEARNING TO LIVE WITH OTHERS"

St. John 8:1-11

Text: "She said, 'No one, Lord.' And Jesus said, 'Neither do I condemn you, go, and do not sin again.'" St. John 8:11

Today is the third in a series of five sermons on the subject of Learning to Live. The first three sermons deal with personal relationships--to ourselves, to God, and today our relationship to others. The next two Sundays we will shift gears. Next Sunday we will talk about "Learning to Live with the Years." How does one deal with the mounting years? How does one handle the gradual deterioration of one's self as time goes on? Then, for the last sermon, we will deal with the fact of death in a sermon entitled, "Learning to Live with Death."

Today our subject is, "Learning to Live with Others." In a chapter entitled, "I and My Brother", a modern theologian has this to say, "The sense of God's love for (Christians), whereby God in Christ stooped to their misery, has made them capable of entering lovingly into the misery of others, not as intruders, but as friends." Yet, is not this precisely the thing we cannot do? To enter lovingly into the misery of others is certainly the ideal. But, as the novelist Dostoyovsky once put it, one can love one's neighbors in the abstract, or even at a distance, but at close quarters it is almost impossible! Charlie Brown, in the comic strip, Peanuts, puts it even more succinctly when he says, "I love mankind, it's people I can't stand."

The first step in maturing in our relationship to others involves a profound insight on our part. That insight is this: the actions of others are motivated by inner needs. We are, in an astounding degree, shaped and molded by our past. Tennyson in one of his epic poems makes one of his characters say, "I am a part of all that I have met...." This is a very real insight into life. Whether we are conscious of it or not, the environment in which we are nurtured is shaping and molding who and what we are. But here is the problem: in one way or another, our environment is always defective--it is always imperfect. Consequently, all of us are carrying needs of one sort or another into life.

Now, it is going to make a profound difference in my relationship to you if I am conscious of the fact that you act the way you do because of needs that eat at you, that motivate you and control you. Let me put it another way. If I am listening to the emotional content of what you do and say rather than to the objective deed or word--if I am listening to the "feeling" you are expressing rather than to the deed you are doing or the word you are saying, it is going to make a profound difference in how I respond to you. For example, take the life a minister lives. With the number and variety of responsibilities, with the various expectations that people have of him, it is bound to follow that someone by their own estimate is going to get slighted or overlooked or neglected. One of the favorite Sunday sports of Christians is to have roast preacher for dinner! No matter what, the pastor won't please everyone. So, when the inevitable criticism comes, the minister who takes it personally is in for a tremendous amount of heartache and hurt. And incidentally, if he does take it personally, it is indicative of a certain lack of maturity on his part. On the other hand, if he listens to such criticism for its emotional content--for the need it is expressing--he is going to hear it with different ears. One person may need a pastoral visit regularly because he needs some tangible sign of his own importance. Another person may have some unhappiness in his life that he cannot or will not admit to the conscious mind. The minister of the church may be a handy and safe place to vent this desperate inner need to let that hurt inside strike back at something or someone.

We see this more obviously in children. A child getting inadequate or insufficient attention at home is going to get that attention he needs one way or another. If he cannot get attention in acceptable ways, he will get it in unacceptable ways. It may not be exactly the sort of attention he wanted, but he makes the parents take note of his existence. You see, bad attention is better than no attention at all. So a child who is obnoxious, who is always bragging and showing off, is really crying out, "Look at me! I am a person. Acknowledge my existence." The February 19th issue of "Newsweek" carried a story about the 50th birthday party that Norman Mailer gave himself. The party drug on past 3:00 a.m. as a few diehards lingered on. The reporter covering the story wrote, "A tiny little bearded man suddenly screamed, 'Does anybody here know my name?'" The reporter concluded, "No one bothered to notice this proclamation of a new ego....he howled and threw his glass against the wall."

In our scripture this morning we read of a woman taken in adultery. Would any person risk home, business, family, reputation for a momentary physical need? Not very many. Why, then, do so many risk such an involvement? Because of a deep, inner need to find acceptance, to be important to someone even if but for a moment. Dr. Tournier, the Swiss psychiatrist, in one of his books writes of his patients, "And when it comes to adultery, they confess to us that it was a thirst for a fellowship, a total self-giving, which they had not found in marriage, that drove them to it."

Perhaps that is why Jesus did not condemn the woman for her adultery. He knew that behind her overt act lay a far deeper and far more serious need that motivated her. Her adultery was only symptomatic. To deal with that alone would miss her real need.

So, as we mature in our relationship with others, we must first recognize that their actions are expressive of needs in their lives. Our hearts and minds must be keenly alert and sensitive to this language in pantomime, this acted out speech that comes from the depths of a man's soul.

The second step in maturing in our relationship to others is this: we must accept others for who and what they are, we must accept them where they are in their pilgrimage of life. This brings us to the heart of the matter--to the nitty-gritty, as the kids say. And that's because one of the first things we ask is something like this, "What if they don't change? What if they don't get better? What if my love and acceptance of them doesn't pay dividends?"

Let me say it quite frankly: if you put a price tag on your acceptance of others--if you demand that they change or be different as the price of your love--you can never get along with others. You see, if you demand of me that I conform to your expectations of me as the price of your love, then I know that you do not love me for myself, you love me only if I surrender myself to your ideal for me.

Let me say it another way. If the condition of your love for another is for that person to change, you are carrying a motivation into that relationship that will destroy it. Do you remember the story of the rich ruler who came to Jesus seeking eternal life? Jesus would say to him, "One thing you lack; go your way, sell whatever you have, and give it to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven: and come, take up your cross and follow me." Yet, Jesus did not base his love and acceptance of the young man on his obedience, on his doing what Jesus wanted him to do, on his conforming to the standard of Jesus. Instead, before he ever placed that requirement on him the Bible says, "Then Jesus beholding him loved him."

Does this begin to make sense to you? If we are maturing in our relationship to

others, we must recognize that their lives give expression to their needs and we accept them--needs and all--for who and what they are. Does your neighbor gossip about you? You must recognize that gossip as an expression of her need to feel important and seek to meet her need. Yet, in Christ you love her whether she gossips or not. Does your wife keep house too poorly--or too well--(there is a need expressed at either extreme)? You must love her for who and what she is. Does your husband infuriate you with childish pouting or by some immature egotism that he brings into the home? In the language of emotion he is speaking to you of some deep, inner need--and you must love him just the same. Is there some person who must always brag, must always excell, must always be in the center of attention? In the language of the emotions he is speaking to you of his need. He is crying out, "I feel insecure. I want to feel important, to be recognized as a person of worth." So, we must love one another, needs and all, remembering the words of Jesus, "If you love them that love you, what reward have you? Do not even the publicans the same?"

This brings us to the heart of what I want to say to you. It is this: within the framework of such a love and such an acceptance, a divine possibility is born in the soul of another. See how it works. Jesus accepted the woman taken in adultery for who and what she was. He accepted her with all of her needs. He did not require her to be worthy of his love and acceptance. He did not require her to do anything or become anything before he accepted her. No, he said simply, "Neither do I condemn thee." And it was then--and only then--that there arose for her a new, a divine possibility--the possibility of going to sin no more.

Do you see what happened to her? She was accepted. Just as she was, just where she was in life's pilgrimage, she was accepted completely. She did not have to carry her needs for acceptance, for love, for all the rest, into life. She was loved. She was accepted. And there were no strings attached. In that love and acceptance, she found what she needed, what she was searching for. No more pretending, no more seeking, no more striving, no more bad and inadequate ways of finding something. She had already found it. Now she was free to be herself--a real person, a whole person--because she was accepted. And when you give that sort of love and acceptance to another--without demands, without a price tag, without strings--such a love frees another to become a whole person. That does not mean they will, but it does mean they are free to do so. They now have a sort of divine possibility of being a whole person, a possibility they never had before.

I have shared with you two excellent rules for maturing in your relationships with others. Now that I have told you what to do, let me tell you quite frankly and as simply as I know how, you cannot practice those two rules....that is, you cannot practice them on your own. I don't care how aware you are that the actions of someone is motivated by inner needs, when they attack you, gossip about you, are jealous of you, or whatever, you will not be able to love them and accept them--at least not from a human point of view. You see, to be able to practice these two rules there is a prior requirement. You, yourself, must first have your needs met in Jesus. You, yourself, must first have surrendered your ego, your needs, your inner motivations, to Jesus. You, yourself, must first have Jesus on the throne of your heart. You can understand others and accept others only if you do it through Jesus. He alone can give you such a love and such an acceptance.

What is your relationship this morning to Jesus? It determines how you get along with others. I'm learning to play the guitar and I've learned a little song that means a lot to me. The first verse of this simple little song goes like this:

"Can others see Jesus in me?

Can others see Jesus in me?

O, how can the world see Jesus,

If it cannot see Jesus in Me."

Indeed, how can it?