

Kingdom Wisdom for Relationships

Fr. Thomas Ryden

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Scriptures: Genesis 2:18–24; Psalm 8; Hebrews 2; Mark 10:2–16

“You complete me.” So goes the supposed most romantic line in the 90s romantic drama Jerry Maguire, a film that for the record I have not seen and so cannot recommend one way or another, but whose famous line that thinks it is about love has had a broader reach than the movie itself. And maybe I am reading it out of context, but the more I think about that line, the more I start to cringe on the inside. It is really the encapsulation of the Hollywood vision for romance and marriage. You look until you find your perfect match, hope they feel the same way about you or work on them until they do and then boom, you are done, happily ever after. It logically extends that if another person can complete us, then we are somehow not complete without that person. This is a harmful way of viewing relationships of all kinds. Another person does not complete us. If we go into friendship, marriage, or parenthood with that expectation, we are setting ourselves up for trouble.

Does the wisdom of the Kingdom offer a better way for viewing relationships? Is there something better than seeking our ultimate fulfillment in other people? We have in our readings this morning a collection of grounding principles that will help us in all our relationships. There is a better answer.

And we begin with our reading from Genesis, the second chapter. Genesis chapter 2 is a poetic retelling of Genesis chapter one, a different angle on the mighty work of creation, one that even gets into the more personal details of Adam and Eve. We see this text as the origin of marriage and of God's design for marriage, but there is even a deeper truth communicated in this account of creation that applies to all human beings, the married and the unmarried: "It is not good that the man should be alone." Part of our created nature is that we were designed to be in relationship with other human beings. We were created for community. This need can be pursued in a variety of ways of course: for all of us in the community of fellowship and friendship in the church, into relationship within our family of origin, and for those called to marriage within marriage. I think there are two over-interpretations of this text that are unhelpful: the first would be for the married person to see this relationship of Adam and Eve and conclude that his or her marriage means they have the relational box checked and therefore don't need to seek out any other friendships. Another miss would be for a single person to read this passage and to think that they are somehow locked out of the gifts of relationship with others because they are not married, a view that unfortunately has been reinforced in Christian culture by a sort of baptized version of the Hollywood vision of the one perfect match that elusively waits out there somewhere.

The truth is much more simple. God created all of us, married and single, for relationship with one another. Some of us are called to marriage and some of us are not. None of us were created to go it alone.

In order to relate well with our fellow human beings, we need to have a proper view of the self and a proper view of others. And we stay in the Genesis account of creation to get to the essential building block of an appropriate view of both - the reality that all people, ourselves included, are created in the image of God and therefore have inherent worth and dignity. Any Christian understanding of ourselves and others must recognize this core truth. When we do not value others in this way, we treat them as objects instead of persons. When we do not see ourselves in this way, we do not believe we are worthy of love and dignity. Neither is in accordance with a properly Christian anthropology.

But beyond that, I want us to turn to Psalm 8 for a bit more on a proper understanding of ourselves as we relate to others and to the world. You will notice that this psalm is bookended with the same phrase: "O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" The psalm, which does have reflections about the role and place of humans in God's design, begins and ends with worship. This is an essential starting point when thinking about ourselves. The aim of a life lived in accordance with our Creator's design is not a feeling of accomplishment or fulfillment. It is not a sense of self-realization or self-actualization. The aim of life is worship. A proper view of self can't get away from this central truth. You and I were made for the worship of the God of the universe.

What does this mean for our relationships? It means that even while we were designed for community, as the Genesis account teaches us, we do not find our ultimate fulfillment in human relationships. Seek first the kingdom of God and all

this will be added unto you. We do need relationships like we need food and water, but they are not our life's purpose. This is first commandment territory - no other before God. Not only is that the standard to which we are called, it is the position from which we receive the best God has for us in our relationships.

The Psalmist writes in verse 3:

“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
what is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?”

Do you hear the humility in these words? A right view of self recognizes with humility the smallness of our lives in view of not only the vastness of creation, the Psalmist mentions the heavens and the stars, but in view of the grandness of God. Far from the world revolving around us, we are participants through grace in God’s order.

But we ought not to mistake the humility of the Psalmist for a low view of self. This rhetorical question, “What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?” implies that God is mindful of his image bearers and does care for them. A humble view of self does not equate to a poor view of self. Humility is about perspective.

The last piece I want to draw out from this psalm is that God has a purpose for our lives, a task for us to do. We can get this out of whack when we think about tying our God-given purpose to one career or job, usually accompanied by our own personal ambitions, but that pitfall shouldn't keep us from the reality that God desires for us to do his will on the earth.

“Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings
and crowned him with glory and honor.

You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet...”

We were not created to be passive bystanders or consumers in God's world. We are meant to be active participants, empowered with his authority. “You have put all things under his feet.”

This is something we have to especially communicate to young people today. A recent study by the Harvard Graduate School of Education found that nearly six in ten (58%) of young adults expressed that having no sense of “meaning or purpose” was a major driver towards negative mental health outcomes.¹ We need to recapture the language of meaning and purpose when we talk about what it means to be a Christian, not least of all because the world is hungry for those things.

¹<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/physical-mental-health/2023/11/01/lack-purpose-drives-anxiety-depression-young-adults>

We wrap the psalm with the repeated reminder that the point of it all is worship, framing this biblical understanding of ourselves as creatures who rightly see their place in humility and have the confidence of our God given purpose, with the aim of not making our own name great, but worshiping the name that is above every name.

With this proper understanding of ourselves in place, we can then look to develop a proper view of others. For this we turn to our gospel reading. There are a couple of layers of this often quoted text that we should unpack so we can use it to help us answer this question of a proper view of others.

The first is the modern assumptions we bring to the text. You will often hear Jesus' use of the Genesis 2 text in this passage, where he goes back to the Eden model for marriage, as a defense of the historic Christian understanding of what marriage is. This is a good way to use this passage because it demonstrates what Jesus, and indeed any observant Jewish person in the first century, takes for granted about God's model for marriage. But that particular point is not the argument that Jesus is having with the Pharisees. The Pharisees are not asking about what the model for marriage is, but what needs to happen for marriage to be dissolved.

There were two major schools of thought in Jesus' day on what constituted lawful grounds for divorce, all hanging on the interpretation of Deuteronomy 24:1, which states that a man may divorce his wife if he finds something indecent about her. You'll note that in this ancient context that the assumption here in the Pharisees

question is about a man divorcing his wife and so the language of the entire conversation reflects that scenario. One school of thought, led by Rabbi Hillel, thought that, so long as the proper paperwork was filled out, this charge of indecency could be met by any complaint a husband had about his wife, down to truly trivial matters. Rabbi Shammai taught that the allowance was, as Jesus says later to his disciples, for adultery.² But Jesus' direct response to the Pharisees is different. He says that for a standard of relating to one another in marriage, these Pharisees aren't going back far enough. To rightly think about marriage, and consequently to divorce, we need to return to its basic and first principles. Genesis 2. The two become one. The Pharisees are asking the wrong questions about marriage. It is not some obligation to get out of on the proper technicality. A husband or a wife is not a burden to be rid of. Marriage is a covenant. The breaking of a covenant is a tragedy, even when done so for unavoidable or justifiable reasons.

The Pharisees weren't seeing to the heart of God's command. As we relate to others, how do we look past a searching-for-loopholes model of relating to one another in marriage, in friendship, in all relationships? How does the second stanza of the Great Commandment put it? Love your neighbor as yourself. "What do I get out of it?" "When can I get out of it?" These are not the right questions for relating to others. Jesus offers a better way.

Immediately after this question on divorce, Mark shares with us one of several times in the Gospels that Jesus says we must become like little children in order to enter

² For this discussion, see Gaebelein, et. al. *The Expositor's Bible Commentary Vol 8*, Mark 10:2.

the Kingdom of God. He's talking about receiving the kingdom with a child's enthusiasm and belief here, but I also think that the attitude of a child presents to us a healthy view of our understanding of God, ourselves, and others.

What does a child think of her parents, herself, and her siblings? Let's assume a good, stable, and safe living situation for just a moment. This is a different sermon, but some of us have more difficulty imagining this question through no fault of our own, but because our default assumptions about home and family are marked by the fact that these were not safe spaces for us. If that is you this morning, remember it is the Good Father who is the head of this household.

A child in a healthy home understands a few things about herself. She is loved. She belongs. It's not all about her. She has a role and responsibility in the family. She understands that she relates to the others on her level, her brothers and sisters, first with love and respect. They are not rivals to be bested or pawns to manipulate. They are beloved co-heirs. She doesn't abuse the rules to get out of her obligations to them. She doesn't tolerate that behavior when it is directed at her. Siblings aren't objects to be used, but whole persons to be loved and delighted in.

How would our relationships change if we saw others first as children of God? Would you do that to your brother? To your sister? These are the questions that can unlock the wisdom of God in our relationships.

We come this morning with as many relational situations, desires, and hurts as there are people here. There are those of us who come content in our relationships with others, those who desire a change in our relational lives, and those who perhaps feel they have no meaningful relationships at all. Wherever you are, and it may be a whole mix of things, return to the core principles of the faith. We were made for community. We are children of our Heavenly Father and therefore brothers and sisters, not merely individuals taking up space near other individuals.

There is a better answer to our relationships than looking for others to complete us. When we are secure in our own identity as fully loved children of God, we then have the freedom to view our relationships not as ways to fill ourselves up, but as ways we can share that love God has given us with others, those near and dear to us and those we have just met. And along the way, we will find ourselves fulfilled in our relational lives as well, not because we have been completed, but because we are living life as it was intended for us to live.