

In 1997 the following letter appeared in newspapers throughout our land:

Dear Ann Landers: You recently printed a sweet “how-we-met” story. The woman said at the end of World War II, she sat behind a soldier in church. He knew all the lyrics to the songs so she figured he couldn’t be all bad. Later, she learned he was a doctor. Three months later, she slipped on an icy walk and injured her arm. That same doctor insisted she stay in the infirmary, and he visited her twice a day. When she was discharged, he asked her to the movies to celebrate. They subsequently married in the same chapel where they had met.

Here’s how that same story would go if it happened NOW:

Dear Ann: Last week, I attended church services and noticed that the soldier sitting behind me knew all the words to every song. I figured anyone who knew those lyrics was probably a member of the religious right. I bumped into him a month later. After cussing him out and telling him to watch where he was going, I learned he was a doctor. Three months later, I slipped on an icy walk and injured my arm. After suing the property owner for all I could get, this same doctor treated me and insisted that I stay in the infirmary. He then made twice-daily visits to see how I was doing, which made me suspicious. I complained to his supervisor and filed a sexual harassment suit. I was discharged in January, and the doctor asked if I would like to see a movie to celebrate. I told the police he was a stalker and applied for a restraining order. When the doctor asked me to marry him in the same chapel where we first met, I called the FBI. They searched his apartment to make sure there were no shrines built to me and no bodies hidden under the floorboards. I married the guy anyway because, after all, doctors earn six-figure incomes. -- [signed] Tuned in and Turned on in La Jolla, Calif.

That letter may be a little extreme, but would you agree that something tragic has happened in our land, **and that something has to do with HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS?** We’re less trusting, more suspicious, fearful of opening ourselves to others. Some of us have no truly close friends. We’re isolated and alone. We wall ourselves into gated communities, and worse yet, we don’t even know the other people behind those walls, much less people outside.

Robert Putnam wrote a book which he titled **Bowling Alone**. He took his title from the fact that while more people than ever are bowling these days, **fewer are doing it in leagues**. There has been a steady decline of civic involvement, neighborhood relationships, and participation in volunteer and religious organizations. **Putnam found that the level of community in America is at its lowest point in our lifetimes.**

Studies show that our society is suffering from our lack of involvement with one another. Not only is our society suffering, so are we as individuals.

Sometime back a team headed by a Harvard social scientist tracked the lives of 7,000 people over nine years. ***Here’s what this team found.*** People with the fewest personal relationships were three times more likely to die than those with strong relational connections. **Three times!** In fact, people with bad health habits such as smoking, poor eating habits, obesity, or alcohol use, but who had strong social ties lived significantly longer than people who had great health habits but were isolated. In other words, as Pastor John Ortberg jokes, ***it is better to eat Twinkies with good friends than to eat broccoli alone.*** Harvard researcher Robert Putnam notes that... ***“if you belong to no groups but decide to join one, you cut your risk of dying over the next year in half.”***

In the words of the old Barbra Streisand song, **“People who need people are the luckiest people in the world . . .”**

RELATIONSHIPS ARE IMPORTANT. You need to believe that or you cannot appreciate Jesus’ words for today. Relationships matter. In fact, **in the long run, the only thing that really matters in life is relationships.**

When life is over, everything we have in this world will disappear and decay. **Only one thing will remain:**

RELATIONSHIPS. This is to say we need our relationships to be strong and we want them to last. Now listen to Jesus’ words: ***“If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”***

This is a most interesting teaching. ***It begins, “If your brother sins against you . . .”*** Now, this doesn’t mean your brother in a literal sense though it could. Has anyone ever seen a family relationship grow strained or even break?

It happens, doesn't it? **My guess is that there is someone in this room who hasn't spoken to at least one member of their family in several years.** Someone said something catty . . . someone took a prized possession from Mom's estate without asking . . . someone borrowed money and never paid it back . . . **The reasons are many and varied, but we all know families where relationships have been splintered and torn.**

But Jesus isn't talking about our bothers or sisters by blood. Probably, he is talking about brothers and sisters within the church community. The early church was like a family. After all many of these people left everything to follow Jesus. Of course, we know that church families can be broken and filled with strife just like normal families.

I believe today that Jesus would have us interpret "brother" as anyone with whom we have a strong personal relationship. A healthy person will have many such relationships as we have already noted.

"If your brother sins against you," says Jesus, "go and show him his fault, just between the two of you . . ."

IN OTHER WORDS, IF SOMEONE YOU CARE ABOUT HURTS YOU, MAKE AN ATTEMPT TO HEAL THE RELATIONSHIP AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE EVEN IF YOU ARE NOT AT FAULT.

What sound, practical advice this is. Wouldn't it be great if everyone who was estranged from a brother or sister or friend or co-worker or spouse would pick up a phone and make an appointment to sit down with that person to iron out their difficulties? **Am I a dreamer? I guess so.** If you think this is an easy teaching by our Lord, you have never had anyone hurt you. **Feelings of betrayal, anger, hurt, bitterness, resentment can sometimes be overwhelming.** *Some of you have been there, haven't you? After a while, it may become a matter of pride.*

Gilbert and Sullivan are two of the great names of musical theater. Their operettas have thrilled millions. But for years they were estranged from each other. Oh, they still collaborated. For years, Gilbert would send Sullivan the lyrics of the operetta they were working on by mail, and Sullivan would send Gilbert the music back by mail. But when they had an opening night, they would stand at opposite ends of the stage and bow facing forward, so that they would not ever need to look at each other. **The problem was that they had a falling out over the purchase of a new carpet in one of their theaters, and they never RESOLVED that grudge.**

It happens. The sad thing is that the closer the relationship, often the more intense the anger, the resentment, the bitterness. And it is very, very difficult to take the first step. Yet Jesus tells us, that is what we must do. It doesn't really matter who is at fault. All that matters is the relationship. That is particularly true in families.

Ray Bowman and his wife, Sally, tried hard to raise their children right. They loved and encouraged them, taught them solid values. But there was one son David, their youngest who nearly broke their hearts. David began using drugs at an early age. Eventually he dropped out of high school and before long he lived on the streets.

Ray dreamed that one day like the Prodigal Son in Jesus' story David would come home, and they would welcome him with open arms. It didn't happen. **David stayed on the streets. Drugs ruled his life.** Then one day, Ray felt God calling him to go to his son and to apologize to his son for his resentment of David's behavior. This was tough, but **Ray swallowed his pride and went to his son and asked for his forgiveness.** David accepted his father's apology with grace. Somehow this was the nudge that David needed. A few weeks later, David came to Christ. He left his drug addiction behind. Today, he is happily married with a fine family, and a responsible job.

Some fathers in our world today, would have real trouble doing that. But in Ray's case, it worked.

If a relationship that is important to you, sometimes, YOU NEED TO SWALLOW YOUR PRIDE AND TAKE THE FIRST STEP. *"If your brother sins against you," says Jesus, "go and show him his fault, just between the two of you." But listen to what he says next, "If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector."*

IN OTHER WORDS, SAYS JESUS, THERE MAY COME A TIME WHEN YOU HAVE TO END A RELATIONSHIP. Now I have to be careful here. Some relationships are sacred. Particularly the marriage relationship, and I don't want to give anyone the idea that I'm advocating severing a marriage relationship. **I'm not.** *But, of course, not even every marriage is made in heaven.*

Barbara Brown Taylor tells a story about a woman who was already dying of cancer when her husband suddenly dropped dead of a heart attack. At his funeral people leaned over her wheelchair to console her by reminding her that it would not be long until she and her husband were together again in heaven. Later when this woman and Rev. Taylor were alone, the woman with tears running down her face looked at Taylor and said, ***“I’m never going to get away from him, am I?”***

That story will either make you laugh or make you cry. Not every relationship can be healed. Particularly in the case of abuse, not every relationship can be healed, or even should be healed. You may have a friend who brings out the worst in you, who tears you down, who makes you question your self-worth. **There are some relationships that should be severed.**

There are parents who have faced the same dilemma that Ray Bowman and his wife faced with a teen-aged child who is hooked on drugs, who’s stealing, who’s responded to their every effort to heal the relationship by taking advantage of them. ***The only way they can possibly force that young person to face the consequences of their actions is to apply tough love. To say to that young person, we love you, but you cannot come back into this home until you are serious about kicking your habit.*** It tears your heart out, but there comes a time when you’ve got to face reality. **Some relationships cannot be healed unless the other person makes some changes.**

Pastor Richard Stetler tells about a friend of his who had a daughter who was off the charts with her behavior. ***She lived a life that witnessed rebellion against all authority figures.*** Her parents were continually taking off work to intercede with her teachers, neighbors and the police. Her parents would set curfews that were routinely violated. She ran with the wrong crowd. Some nights she did not come home until dawn the next day. She would steal money from their home, shoplift. Her parents were becoming exhausted trying to deal with her. Weary and in pain, and in order to maintain their sanity, the parents went to court to have their daughter declared an “FREE” Minor. She immediately moved in with her older companion, thrilled to be out from under the WATCHFUL EYES of her parents. The mother told Pastor Stetler, ***“You can always remove a child from your family, but you can never remove her from your heart. Whatever she is looking for, I sure hope she finds it. We have done everything we know how to do to show her our love, support and guidance, but right now she cannot see beyond her need to express her independence through defiance.”***

It’s not an uncommon occurrence. We love Jesus’ story of the prodigal son, but the prodigal has to want to come home, and sometimes that never happens. ***Relationships matter. If you have a relationship that has been broken and can yet be healed, you take the first step. But not every relationship can be healed.***

AT SUCH TIMES WE NEED TO TURN TO OUR PRIMARY RELATIONSHIP, OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.

If a relationship that is important to you... IS BROKEN AND IN NEED OF HEALING—SOMETIMES WE NEED TO TAKE THE FIRST STEP, EVEN IF THE CAUSE OF THE BROKENNESS WAS NOT OUR FAULT. Especially if this relationship is friends in the church, as Christ suggests. And for strength and guidance to do this we best turn for wisdom from God Himself. We may pray for God to heal the relationship. We may need to pray to God to heal us if the relationship cannot be healed, to help us to accept the inevitable and to keep us from bitterness and resentment.

But even more, we pray that this experience of a broken relationship will draw us even closer to God.

For it is from our relationship with God, not with another human being, that we draw our strength and our identity—AND OUR ABILITY TO LISTEN IN A NEW WAY TO ONE ANOTHER—AND YES FIND HEALING.

AMEN.