



“The Good Life: Relationships”

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Proverbs 18:24; Ecclesiastes 4:8-12

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We are continuing this week in our sermon series called “The Good Life,” where we are discovering the markers of a good life, particularly for us as Christians. During the last two Sundays we have learned that worldly markers of the good life, success and happiness, oftentimes look different for us as we follow Christ. Success is not found in material things and the accumulation of wealth. Instead, Jesus invites us to love God and our neighbor and to join God’s mission for the world. Our identity is not in what we have but in Christ. Happiness is something we all pursue but is truly found in seeking the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness. Happiness is not found in extrinsic rewards or our pursuit of self-interest, but in the true and lasting joy we find in God. Today we discuss another component of the good life: relationships.

Our individualistic society here in the United States often emphasizes the individual over the community, and we have seen negative implications of that throughout the pandemic with individual rights and freedoms taking precedent over the common and community good. We like being independent, lone wolves, if you will. We are self-sufficient, we are good on our own, we do not need anybody else! Yet research and experience tell us otherwise. The pandemic has brought to light the long-standing problem of loneliness and isolation. An article published in the scientific journal *Nature* in January 2021 reported the results of a study on the subjective experience of social isolation in adults ranging from 18-84. Research discovered that “physical distancing as a result of the [COVID] pandemic suggests that social isolation is a significant factor in the public health crisis... perceived social isolation is related to numerous negative outcomes related to both physical and mental health.”¹ These results were not seen only in older adults, but young adults, as well. All age groups were negatively impacted by social isolation. We did this to keep one another and ourselves safe, but it has lasting impact. Why did we see such negative outcomes? We were made for connection and relationship with others. The good life is built with good relationships.

For over 75 years, the Harvard Study of Adult Development has sought to learn what keeps us happy and healthy throughout life. This study began in 1938 with two groups of men: Harvard graduates and boys who grew up in Boston’s poorest neighborhoods, comprising 724 research participants in total.² The participants would receive a questionnaire every two years, researchers would receive information from the participant’s physicians every five years, and personal interviews were conducted on a regular basis throughout the entire study. The questionnaires included questions regarding physical and mental health, marital quality, career or retirement enjoyment, as well as many other life questions. This study is potentially the longest study of adult life that has ever been conducted and it continues to this day with roughly 60 of the original participants still alive and participating in the study.

The initial participants were vastly different in regard to socioeconomic status: Harvard graduates and young boys from poor, troubled, and disadvantaged families. What has over 75 years of research revealed? The results have nothing to do with wealth, but with relationships. The fourth and current director, Robert Waldinger, quoted in his TED Talk “The clearest message that we get from this 75-year study is this: Good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Period.”³ Waldinger highlights three key learnings about relationships. First, social connections are really good for us and loneliness kills. Research shows that people who are more socially connected to family, friends, and their community are not only happier but are physically healthier and live longer. Those who are less connected and more isolated are less happy, less healthy, both physically and mentally, and live shorter lives. I think we have witnessed this firsthand with the social isolation during the pandemic, and continue to do so.

¹ Clair, R., Gordon, M., Kroon, M. *et al.* The effects of social isolation on well-being and life satisfaction during pandemic. *Humanit Soc Sci Commun* **8**, 28 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00710-3>

² <https://habitnest.com/blogs/habit-nest-blog/what-a-75-year-harvard-study-says-is-the-secret-to-a-good-life>

³ https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_waldinger_what_makes_a_good_life_lessons_from_the_longest_study_on_happiness/transcript

The second finding is that it is not about the number of friends or being in a committed relationship, but the quality of the close relationships. Living in conflict is bad for our health, but warm, good relationships protect us. Once the study participants reached their 80s, researchers looked back through the data to find indicators of who would grow into happy, healthy octogenarians and who would not. It turns out that it was not cholesterol levels, but how satisfied they were in their relationships. Those who were most satisfied in their relationships at age 50 were the healthiest at age 80. The third and final finding was that good relationships do not just protect our bodies, but our brains, as well. Being in a securely attached relationship is protective. Being in a relationship where they felt like they could count on the other person in times of need resulted in their memories staying sharper, longer.

This study reveals that the people who fared the best over time were those who leaned into relationships with family, friends, and the community. In short, the good life is built with good relationships. I do not think that any of this is ground-breaking information, necessarily. I think we inherently know that being in relationship with others is important. And I am not implying a marriage or romantic partner here. That is certainly a source of relationship for many but is not the only one. Any sort of companion: family member, spouse, partner, friend qualifies here. We are talking about quality, life-giving relationships, no matter who they are to you. Other than what I have already shared about relationships from this study, why do we have a need for relationships?

As humans, we have a fundamental need for relationships and connection with other humans because we were created that way. We were made in the image of God. As Christians, we affirm a Triune God: One God, Three Persons. I am not going to go very deep in the theology of the Trinity because I do not feel like leaving your head spinning today, but it is important to know that there are three distinct Persons in the Trinity: Father (or Parent), Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The three Persons of the Trinity have co-existed eternally, meaning all three Persons have always existed together and always will. They are in an eternal, loving relationship; a community woven together with threads of love. Humanity was born out of the love that exists between the three Persons of the Trinity. Genesis 1:27 reads "God created humanity in God's own image, in the divine image God created them." Our desire and need to be in relationship with others are because we bear the image of God and our God is relational. Not only do we need to be in relationship with each other, God invites us into relationship with Godself. Our study of the good life thus far has shown us that it is not about worldly means and extrinsic rewards, but a life centered in God. The relationships we have make all the difference, and that includes our relationship with God.

This brings us to our scripture passages for today. What does the Bible tell us about relationships? First, from Proverbs 18:24, "There are persons for companionship, but then there are friends who are more loyal than family." The first part of this verse is open to a large number of readings and translations because there is linguistic ambiguity in the original Hebrew. For example, the NRSV reads "Some friends play at friendship but a true friend sticks closer than one's nearest kin." Despite the first half of each translation reading differently, both speak to the importance of true friends. It also reveals that our biological family may not always be a source of good, reliable, quality relationships. Whether biological or not, what matters is having someone we can rely on, which connects back to the second finding in the research study. It is about having good, warm, quality relationships.

Which brings us to our passage from Ecclesiastes. I'll pause here for a moment. Our scripture lesson from Ecclesiastes is a hard passage. It was not one of the original scripture lessons for today, but I was drawn to it. A large part of me said, "Amanda, just choose an easier passage!" But my very next thought was "don't shy away from a passage just because it is hard." As your pastor, I am not doing you or myself any favors by only preaching what is easy. So I endeavor to be faithful to what I feel God wants us to learn and see in Ecclesiastes. And on the surface, maybe it does not seem all that difficult of a passage. Its all about companionship, right? Its all about being in relationship with others, right? Yes, it is. But it reads differently if you are a widow or a widower. It reads differently if you are alone. It reads differently if you have lost your companion, a child, a parent, a friend. We cannot acknowledge the importance of relationships in the good life without also acknowledging the grief and loss that come along with those relationships. We cannot acknowledge the importance of relationships without also acknowledging how difficult it can be to forge and form those lasting, life-giving relationships. It is not easy and the older we get, the harder it is. I want to honor the fact that things are not necessarily as they should be or as they once were. It is part of our shared humanity that we need relationships while we also grieve because of them. It is my sincere hope that everyone here has at least one meaningful relationship. We were not made to journey alone.

What does Ecclesiastes tell us about the importance of relationships? The first part of our passage illustrates someone who has forsaken relationships for the pursuit of wealth. They work hard and are never satisfied with their

wealth. This is an Ebenezer Scrooge situation here. My family may or may not have already watched both Mickey's Christmas Carol and the Muppet's Christmas Carol within the past week. In the Christmas Carol we see Scrooge forsaking all relationships in his life in the pursuit of wealth, but we also see a terribly unhappy individual that most people are either afraid of or do not like. Wealth did not satisfy him. Wealth will not satisfy the longings of our hearts. Rather than working for the benefits of wealth, we are better off working for the benefits of friendship and close relationships because they are more rewarding, more reliable, and more enduring than wealth in the long run. Plus, they make us happier!

The author of Ecclesiastes considers all of this solitary work and toil pointless! Rather, it is much better to work and do life together. Verse 10 reads "If either should fall, one can pick up the other. But how miserable are those who fall and do not have a companion to help them up!" We might think of falling in literal terms, such as in falling to the ground and needing a hand to get up again. But it is more than a physical fall. We need others in our lives to help us when we face challenges in life. When hard times hit and we do not know what to do. When we experience loss. When our faith is shaken. When we start questioning everything. When we get sick or get hurt. We need others that we can count on for the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual falls that can happen in life. And in return, we need to be companions that other people can rely on. We cannot always take without giving in return. Good relationships are marked by mutual accountability, commitment, and presence. Good relationships strengthen us and keep us grounded. Good relationships are like that three-ply cord the author of Ecclesiastes describes: strong, resilient, and a representation of the loving community that exists within our Trinitarian God.

Good relationships are crucial to the good life. However, we know that relationships can be messy. We are human, after all! Yet this should not stop us from building and nurturing relationships with others. What are some practical things that we can do to cultivate relationships? Maybe it looks like connecting with someone you have not talked to in a while, whether through a phone call, card, text, or even meeting safely in-person. If you are here in church today, say hello and introduce yourself to someone you are not already friends with. Join a Sunday school class or small group here at church or join in a ministry you have not been part of before. If you are already in a close relationship, maybe do something fun and different together. And do not forget to do the spiritual practices that nurture your relationship with God. Our relationship with God is central to the good life and is the basis for all the other relationships in our lives.

Good relationships make all the difference in our lives. They keep us healthy, happy, and improve our overall well-being. The good life is not about building wealth, gaining possessions, or seeking a self-centered version of happiness. No, the good life is about nurturing our relationship with God and cultivating meaningful relationships with others. We were made for each other. How powerful and wonderful it would be if we as a church community consistently reflected the love of God through the relationships we have, both with each other here in this place and beyond. That kind of love changes the world. Because God loved us first, we can love others and develop those good relationships that lead to the good life. Thanks be to God. Amen.