Sermon Series: Overwhelmed
Relationships by David Hockett **Boone UMC**
Ephesians 2:11-22 **October 4, 2015**

Relationships…all of us are participants in a variety of different kinds of relationships. Some of these relationships are business arrangements, community connections, relationships with neighbors, or patrons, relationships because we share membership in a club or organization or hobby, some of our relationships are professional, as in business arrangements with colleagues, or clients, some are matters of convenience, others are intentional, long-term, and life-giving. Some of our relationships are close, like down to the level of sharing our DNA, like the relationships between parent and child, or between siblings. And some of our relationships are the result of our choosing to be related to one another as in the relationship between husband and wife. We all are interconnected with one another through a variety of relationships, and some of our relationships overwhelm us by their beauty and goodness, while others… well, they just leave us feeling overwhelmed.

As Jeff said last week, we're all in this boat together. Each and every one of us, including me, have at one time or another found ourselves in the boat being battered by the wind and the waves, or if we haven't yet we will be overwhelmed by the relationships that define our lives, and maybe even find ourselves wondering where on earth is God in the midst of it all? Wondering is there a word from the Lord, a word of healing or restoration, around some of our relationships? As a pastor I have had the privilege of witnessing some amazing and beautiful relationships – marriages that lasted decades, families that embodied God's love and grace as they cared for one another, communities that were so in love with God that their life together was a beautiful witness for the Kingdom. Those are relationships to celebrate and give thanks for. And I'll bet you can name some of those kinds of relationships in your lives. Sadly, I have also been present with countless folks who have shared story after story of overwhelming relationships, of broken marriages, wayward children, fractured families, lost friendships, of relationships that have become more of a burden than a blessing. *And* I've also been on the other side of that conversation, sharing my joy around relationships like the one Kim and I have that is a blessing beyond anything I could imagine or deserve, or the relationships I have with our children, these relationships are truly gifts from God, treasures to be cherished. And, like some of you, I've also been overwhelmed at times by relationships with family or friends that are burdensome and hard to bear, that seem to be the opposite of what God hopes for in our relationships.

A few of you are aware that for twenty years or more my younger sister has struggled with addiction. She's been in and out of recovery, really struggled to find healing for what is a terrible prison. I love her, and long for her to be well and whole, but it would be an understatement to say that her addiction has affected our relationship. Any of you who struggle with addiction or

love someone who does know painfully well that addiction cannot only hinder relationships but it often destroys them. Trust is broken, kindness and friendship are often betrayed, the on and off again nature of recovery is just inexplicable, and it can lead to bitterness, anger, sadness, to the point that you may just want to throw in the towel and say enough is enough. And there is really nothing you can do to fix it. So it's a lot like being in that boat, at the mercy of the wind and the waves, wondering where on earth is Jesus? And yet, this is one of the relationships God has given me and I know, I'm a pastor, I preach this stuff all the time, I know that my ability to love her and forgive her directly impacts my ability to love God. So I need your prayers around our relationship.

We were created for relationships and when they are beautiful and good we celebrate that we were made for relationship. And when they seem to choke the life out of us it we may want to avoid them altogether. But either way, we were not meant to live alone, in isolation from God and one another. God longs for us to draw near to God in relationship, and God blesses us with the opportunity to share life with others.

From the beginning God invited us to share in the divine life, to participate in God's very being, to be in relationship with God. From the beginning God intended for us to share life with one another, forming Adam and Eve to be companions in life. And God called Abraham and Sarah, not for the salvation of isolated individuals but to parent God's new family. And God formed Israel to be a holy people, not person, but a people, a community in relationship with one another and with God, a people in relationship who would bless the nations. And Jesus, the very Son of God, called disciples to be a part of a community, to be joined together as the first fruits of a new humanity. Jesus didn't call Peter, James, John, Andrew and all the others and leave them to themselves, isolated from him and from one another. He didn't say, "Well you can be a part of the life of God, on your own, in your fishing boat out on the lake." No, he said, "Lay down your nets, come and follow me, share life with me, abide in me, abide with one another, and I will abide with you, you are my body." We know that if we remove a limb or an organ from the body that limb or organ will soon be devoid of life. We need each other. Being in relationship is a part of what it means to be created in the image of God. Why then do we sometimes believe and live as if we can be vital, thriving, disciples, even vital, thriving human beings, if we remove ourselves from any sort of meaningful connection to one another? Wesley put it this way, "Holy solitaries is a phrase no more consistent with the gospel than holy adulterers. The gospel of Christ knows of no religion, but social; no holiness but social holiness."

Difficult as they may be at times, we were made for relationship – to be in communion with God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and to share life with one another. If you think about a wagon wheel or bicycle wheel, the hub is at the center and the spokes are moving inward from the rim. If Christ is in the center, the hub, which holds all things together, then as we draw closer to Christ we move down the spokes and draw closer to one another as well.

In part, the salvation that was won for us in Christ Jesus entails the renewal of human relationships. Jesus is the model for what it means to be a human being in relationship with God and with other human beings. And, he is the beginning of and the means to the healing and the restoration of all our relationships. As the writer of Ephesians acknowledges, we are painfully divided from one another. Our original sin not only separates us from God, it adversely affects all of our relationships so that we no longer relate to one another, even to those closest to us, in the way that God intended.

But Jesus broke down the dividing walls that hinder true relationships and calls us into a new community, which we know as the church, where we can learn to love one another again. Flawed and broken as it is, the Church is intended to be a foretaste of God's Kingdom. And God's Kingdom is a place where there are no walls, no divisions, nothing that separates us from one another or from God. And Ephesians offers this beautiful image of Jesus as the cornerstone of the whole thing. He is the foundation and the key to our life together as Church, and as such he is the norm for all of our relationships. As the cornerstone to a renewed humanity Jesus makes it possible for us to be at peace; at peace within ourselves, at peace with God, and at peace with one another. It's why this Table is so important. Because when we gather here God is renewing our relationship with Christ and the relationships we have with one another. When we break bread together and share a common cup, when we do something as intimate as eat together in the name of Jesus, God is at work reconciling us to God and overcoming any divisions that separate us from one another.

Wesley understood this, which is why he had a method for relationships. It was a way of life centered on community with the purpose of enabling members to deepen their relationship with God and their love for others. Wesley knew that community was central to healthy relationships both with others and with God. And so the early Methodists gathered together in Society meetings for worship, in weekly class meetings which were like small groups that met for prayer, study, encouragement and accountability, and in what he called bands which were smaller groups of believers who were very mature in their faith and who would ask one another how is it with your soul? What sins are holding you back from more fully loving God and your neighbor? It's the kind of place, the kind of holy relationship where someone just might dare ask a pastor, "Hey when are you going to work on those relationships you find difficult?"

Friends we will never be the kind of Christians God longs for us to be, and we will never experience healing and wholeness in our relationships without these kinds of holy friendships. Jim Harnish puts it this way, "We can be religious or spiritual without the presence of other people in our lives, but we cannot be growing disciples of Jesus Christ without the encouragement, guidance, wisdom and accountability of Christian friends. Our culture, tells us that spirituality is an individual thing between a person and God and is not to be shared,

experienced, or talked about with others. But in the Scriptures, the life of faith is persistently communal….Biblically speaking, solitary salvation is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. Living by faith means being a part of God's community….In the New Testament salvation – our new relationship with God in Christ – means being a part of the 'new creation' in the body of Christ. When we are born again, we are born into a new family of brothers and sisters whom we did not choose. They are given to us in the love of God. Being saved does not mean holding a solitary ticket for a solo flight to heaven; rather, it means becoming an important part of the body of Christ. In community, together, in relationship we learn to love God and love others and learn how to participate in God's transformation of the world." (*A Disciple's Path*)

Friends, we need each other, for a variety of reasons, but one, because Jesus tells us that we do and shows us that we do by the way he lived. He spent his life in relationship with close friends who ate together, prayed together, cried together, served together, shared life together. They at times annoyed one another, fought, got angry, disappointed one another, there were moments of overwhelming beauty and joy, and times of overwhelming grief and pain. After all, they broke his heart. Think about it, his closest friends all deserted him when he needed them the most, they all denied him, and turned their backs on him, and yet, he returned to each one of them to reconcile their friendship and to give them the chance to begin again, not because they deserved it but because God loves that much and God wants us to be in relationship.

Last week Jeff and Vern asked us to share requests for prayer around the things that overwhelm us. And you did, and we were overwhelmed. At our Tuesday morning staff meeting we devoted a little more than half of our meeting to praying, individually, for each concern and request. It was a holy privilege to pray for you and we'll continue to pray over your requests throughout this series and beyond. If you were unable to share your request with us last week, we invite you to do so today or at any time. We want to pray for you. You shared the ways in which you are being overwhelmed, in your desire for healthy marriages and friendships, for reconciliation among family members, for the ways you are being overwhelmed in your care and concern for loved ones facing series health issues, or addiction, lack of employment, or loneliness, or lack of direction in life. You invited us to pray with you for your children and grandchildren, for your spouses and friends, for concerns with relationships at work, at school, and even in church.

We were overwhelmed by what is overwhelming us all. It was a powerful reminder that we aren't meant to carry this load alone. We are meant to live this life together, with Jesus. We're all in the same boat. God has given us each other and calls us to work out our salvation together, and to watch over one another in love. Friends, watch over one another in love.