**‘Made for each other’ - Relationships LLF 3 - Sun 3 &10 Oct**

1. SLIDE 1 Today as we continue our series accompanying the Living in Love and Faith course we are going to be thinking about the huge topic of relationships.
   1. Facebook users can define their relationship status. In simpler halcyon days there would probably have been 3 options: single, married or widowed.
   2. SLIDE 2 But Facebook of course reflects current reality so you can choose one of: single, engaged, married, in civil partnership, in domestic partnership, open relationship, it’s complicated, separated, divorced, widowed!
   3. When people use the word ‘relationship’ today they tend to think of these statuses, but relationships are far more than just about having a long-term partner.
   4. There are many types of relationships: the powerful blood ties of families, the intimate relationship in marriage, the varied types of friendships we have and the casual acquaintances who come in and out of our lives and today
   5. I’m going to try and cover the biblical aspect of relationships in their broadest sense in just over 15 minutes so I can’t cover everything and I’m not going to be definitive about everything. I may leave you with as many questions as answers and I may cover some sensitive areas in relationships, but as we said at the start of Living in Love and Faith it is important to discuss these topics and not sweep them under the carpet.
2. Right at the start of talking about relationships it is important to say that relationship is at the heart of God himself. SL 2a
   1. God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the three in one, a concept we can’t fully get our head around, but implies close intimate relationship within God himself.
   2. As Sam said two weeks ago when talking about identity, we are made in God’s image and part of that is that we are made with a need for good relationships. Genesis chapters 1, - 3 set the scene for biblical theology and in chapter 2:18 God says “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.”
   3. But this goes beyond just the need for a life partner and to the heart of what it means to be human – we need each other. “No man is an island” as the 17th century Christian poet John Donne famously said.
   4. Jesus never married or had children, very unusual in his day, but relationships were at the heart of his earthly life. Most importantly was his close relationship with his heavenly Father, Abba (daddy) he called him. But he also had strong family relationships, and very close friendships with his disciples who travelled with him and shared life together for the 3 years of his ministry.
   5. He had particularly close friendships with Peter, James and John and good friendships with many outside the 12 including women like Mary and Martha and Mary Magdalene as well as Jewish leaders like Nicodemus. And he was known as the friend of sinners by those who disliked him.
3. SLIDE 3 Jesus needed friends and so do we.
   1. There are many levels of friendships. 3a The more casual ones we might call acquaintances are with our work colleagues, neighbours, church attenders, people in our social circle, friends on social media etc who we interact with casually.
   2. For Jesus this would equate to the crowds that followed him, that he would have seen on and off as he travelled.
   3. 3b Then there are a much smaller group of good friends. People we have a lot in common with, are on the same wavelength as, make us laugh, enjoy spending time with, socialise with on their own or with one or two others, talk about some of the deeper things in life with – our emotions, beliefs, personal life. They enrich us and energise us, give us life and joy, support and comfort in times of trouble.
   4. For Jesus this would be his 12 disciples and maybe a few other of his followers.
   5. 3c Then there are really close friends – for most people no more than 5. They are people you just click with, who know and understand you, who you pour out your deepest emotions to, who remain close over time, even if you move away, who maybe you pray with one to one.
   6. For Jesus this would be his inner circle of Peter, James sand John who went with him at times when the 12 didn’t.
4. SLIDE 4 We see this sort of close friendship between Naomi and Ruth in our Old Testament reading.
   1. It is an unusual friendship because there was a generational difference and because Ruth was a Moabite and Naomi an Israelite. As nations they disliked each other and were enemies.
   2. But famine took Naomi to Moab, her sons married Moabite women and when her sons died Naomi’s daughters-in-law remained with her. 4a When the famine was over Naomi returned to Israel and Ruth was determined to go with her saying “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God…  May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.”
   3. There was something about Naomi that drew Ruth to her. They were connected by marriage, but there was much more to it than that. Naomi’s love, warmth and her faith created a close friendship that meant Ruth was prepared to leave her own people and live in the nation of their enemy.
   4. And as the story progresses we see Naomi and Ruth’s friendship deepen and Naomi help find a husband for Ruth.
5. SLIDE 5 We see another close friendship in the Old Testament between David and Jonathan.
   1. They were of a similar age and Jonathan was the son of Saul the king, who was trying to kill David out of jealousy. Theirs was a natural, deep friendship. 5a As 1 Samuel 18:1 says ‘Jonathan became one in spirit with David, and he loved him as himself.’
   2. Some have suggested they had a homosexual relationship because of this intimate bond and from the text that says as they parted “they kissed each other and wept with each other”. But that was an ordinary aspect of male relationships in biblical culture and they were both married. I remember the awkwardness I felt when I spent a year in Africa when adult males wanted to walk around holding my hand, because for them it was a sign of friendship and nothing more. It was a cultural thing that I had to get used to.
6. SLIDE 6 Both Naomi and Ruth, and David and Jonathan made covenanted promises to each other, a solemn commitment to honour their friendship.
   1. It didn’t replace marriage, but was a separate bond showing their deep commitment in friendship.
   2. As humans God made us with a desire for intimacy, closeness, sharing. 6a Intimacy with God is important as we see in John 15 where Jesus talks of his followers being his friends and remaining in his love.
   3. But we need a level of intimacy with other humans as well. That’s why marriage is so important in the bible, but intimacy can be found in many other types of relationships in different ways and is far more than sexual intimacy.
   4. It is about sharing, openly and vulnerably and often involves touch like hugs that is not of a sexual nature.
7. SLIDE 7 Now according to a national survey in 2018 exactly 50% of people were married, which meant that 50% of people were single
   1. Either never married, divorced or widowed. Some may have been engaged, others living with their partner, but being single is very normal, though single people can often get marginalised even in churches.
   2. Some people choose to be single, at least for a period of their life, for a variety of reasons. Some Christians pattern themselves on Jesus’ single celibate life so they can serve God freely, such as in monastic communities or Roman Catholic priests, but ordinary Christians do too.
   3. And of course apostle Paul commended singleness in 1 Corinthians 7 for those who wanted to serve the Lord wholeheartedly.
   4. Many, however, are single and celibate not out of choice or calling, but through circumstances of not having found the right partner, or having been divorced or widowed. Therefore there is often sadness or emotional pain in being single, though it has often been worked through and come to terms with. Sensitivity is so important so that single people aren’t asked people awkward questions about their relationships.
   5. With the innate need for closeness and intimacy in humans close friends are particularly important for most single people so they need to be nurtured and valued and supported. These close friendships can be of the same sex, can be found in siblings, can be found in companions of the opposite sex. All are normal and natural and don’t need speculation or comment upon, but acceptance and support.
8. SLIDE 8 Intimacy should be central to marriage, both emotional and physical intimacy, though marriage is also about companionship, as well as a secure foundation for bringing up children.
   1. Although Matthew 19 is about divorce it gives us an insight into Jesus’ view of marriage. He affirms it is about unity - of purpose and in body - and that it is God who joins husband and wife together. The implication is that marriage is the right place for sexual relationships, and we will be looking at sex further in the next in this series.
   2. By being against any cause divorce Jesus affirms the importance and permanence of marriage, recognising how as the marriage service says “It enriches society and strengthens community”.
   3. SLIDE 9 The Old Testament allowed for divorce, because God recognised that humans were sinful and made mistakes, and Jesus allowed it for ‘marital unfaithfulness’, but no more.
   4. For marital unfaithfulness I think we can include sexual unfaithfulness, physical and emotional abuse, unfaithfulness to marriage vows of long-lasting commitment to the other.
   5. As Christians we should be committed to doing everything we can to keeping our marriages, and our friends’ marriages, strong. Not taking the other person for granted, sharing feelings honestly and respectfully so that the marriage doesn’t collapse under the pressures of life. Because, as many of you testify, marriage brings great joy, stability, intimacy, support and strength for each other and children within it.
   6. But at the same time we have to acknowledge reluctantly that sometimes divorce is the only option. It may not be God’s ideal, but can be necessary for emotional survival, if all avenues for staying together have been pursued.
   7. Just recently I recommended separation to a married person (not in this parish), because their spouse emotionally abused them persistently and significantly, could not see it and would not change and made their life hell.
   8. Divorce can fill people with guilt and shame, but as Christians we know that God can heal our pasts and take away our feelings of guilt, whether deserved or not and we all need support those going through difficult times in their marriage with understanding and lots of cups of tea!
9. SLIDE 10 In Jesus’ time marriage was between a man and woman so that leads us to the tricky subject, especially for Christians, of same-sex attraction and partnerships.
   1. Genesis 2 speaks of a man being united with his wife and becoming one flesh, and their sexual union has the potential to conceive children, traditionally a major reason for marriage.
   2. Therefore throughout history there has been a tendency to see homosexuality as unnatural and sinful. Various biblical texts in Leviticus, Romans and 1 Corinthians appear to confirm this view of homosexuality as a sin, though as we will see in two week’s time Jesus never spoke of it and there are different interpretations of the text taking into culture, language and context as well as recent scientific understanding of sexual attraction.
   3. But what if you are attracted to someone of the same sex? You still have a natural instinct for emotional and physical intimacy. Should that mean you can’t have a relationship with someone of the same sex that offers either or both types of intimacy?
   4. There are Christians who enter into committed same-sex relations, but believe it needs to be a celibate relationship if it is to be biblical which is tough, but is their commitment to God. But other Christians do not believe God would impose such a rule on people who love each other, bring life to each other and live committed, faithful lives.
   5. We will have our views on this and be exploring it as part of the Living in Love and Faith course as well as the next sermon in the series, but a question we have to ask ourselves is how do we treat and value people in same-sex partnerships?
   6. Do we judge them differently to heterosexual couples who sleep together before marriage? Do we respect them as humans? Do we welcome them into our churches and treat them as we would anyone else? Or do we treat them differently, suspiciously, and make awkward statements? Whilst society is much more accepting now there is still prejudice and much pain. How do we as Christians live out our call to be loving, especially of those who society often rejects?
   7. Lots of questions rather than answers, but it important that we reflect honestly on these matters, looking at the whole bible, rather than just taking isolated texts.
   8. And I’m aware that touching on these sensitive subjects may be painful for some here. If that is the case me, Rachel, Sam and the pastoral assistants are here to listen non-judgmentally, to support, help and pray for you so please do speak with one of us.
10. SLIDE 11 As we have whizzed through this huge topic of relationships of which so much more could be said, I want to finish with the title I have given this sermon – “Made for each other”
    1. It is often used in wedding speeches to show how well suited a couple are, but it is a phrase relevant for all humans.
    2. Because we were not made to be alone, we were made for each other. We were made to have different types of human relationships which all bring something unique as well as being made for a spiritual relationship with God. We were made for closeness and intimacy, which can take various forms, there is no single blueprint for a close relationship.
    3. 11a In every relationship there should be mutuality, a sharing of life in love and fruitfulness, a bringing of life through love. We see that in Ruth’s devotion to Naomi as a widow and in Naomi in helping Ruth find a husband
    4. We need to invest in relationships that provide mutuality and fruitfulness that enable us and the other person to flourish.
    5. And we need to be sensitive, supporting and non-judgmental to other people in their relationships and especially close relationships.
    6. 11b The actor Jodie Foster said “Love and respect are the most important aspect of all relationships” and I think if our church can truly love and respect each other we will be living like Christ and be an attractive community in a world where discord and disrespect are rife. AMEN