

I heard a great little story recently that I want to share with you. Are you ready?

A man said, "My wife and I were sitting at a table at my recent 40th high school reunion, and I kept staring at a drunken lady swigging her drink as she sat alone at a nearby table.

"My wife asked, 'Do you know her?'

"'Yes,' I sighed, 'she's my old girlfriend. I understand she took to drinking right after we split up those many years ago, and I hear she hasn't been sober since.'

"My Goodness!' said my wife, 'Who would think a person could go on celebrating that long?'"

I loved it. Clearly the husband thought that he would garner some sympathy from his wife over what he thought was a lady pining over him for a long time. Clearly the wife saw it a different way.

And that is the challenge of relationships. Whenever we try and build a life with another person, whether a friend or a spouse or a parent or a child, we have a tendency to see things differently. The real question is what are we going to do about that? How are we going to work through that?

My grandpa Carlson once said to me, "Scott, do you know when you have found the right person to get married to?" I said, "No".

He said, "You have found the right person to marry, when you can figure out how to argue with them." I think I saw him shoot a smile to my grandmother right afterwards.

My Grandma Carlson was a spitfire of a lady. She was always on the go. She kind of ran roughshod over others. But my grandpa knew how to love her, care for her and challenge her. She may have simply had her way with a lot of other people, but Granny and Pops knew how to get along.

Today, we are talking about relationships and how they can stress us out. We are in the midst of a sermon series on stress. We are looking at a variety of ways we go through stress and some strategies we can use to deal with them. So far, we have talked about how God is already turning to us when we get stressed. We have talked about we can find healing in God when we are overloaded.

Relationships are not always easy. At the heart of any healthy relationship is trust, built on a solid foundation of communication. Sometimes we struggle to get along with others. It happens because we have different expectations. It happens when we stop talking with each other.

So, what can we do when a relationship that we care about becomes stressed?

I think that our scripture actually offers us some clues. In our scripture Jesus simply says, *"There will always be temptations to sin, but how terrible it will be for the person who does the tempting. It would be better to be thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around the neck than to face the punishment in store for harming one of these little ones."*

First of all, Jesus acknowledges that we aren't perfect. We will be tempted to sin. We may even be tempted to hurt another. But the warning is work to not hurt another person. I am reminded of John Wesley's first Rule for living a life of faith, DO NO Harm.

The challenge in so many relationships is that when we know another person well, we also tend to know how to push their buttons and get them going. Jesus actually invites us here, I believe, to not go about intentionally pushing buttons to upset other people.

Are you willing to do no harm? Are you willing to stop pushing buttons?

The second thing Jesus acknowledges about relationships here is that we need to be willing to forgive, even if we have been hurt. *"I am warning you! If another believer sins, rebuke him; then if*

*he repents, forgive him. Even if he wrongs you seven times a day and each time turns again and asks forgiveness, forgive him."*

When someone hurts us, the first thing we want to do is get back at them. We want to get even. We want them to feel the hurt, the pain, the injustice that we have felt.

I love the disciple's response to this. Because it is just as difficult for them to forgive as it is for us. It is almost as if upon hearing this challenge to forgive they say, *Our faith isn't that great to be able to forgive people who hurt us. We need more faith, tell us how to get to that point?*

Jesus' response is simply, *If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you can do anything you really want.*

Jesus invites us, when we have been wronged, to not look at the wrong as much as we look to God to help us deal with the wrong.

It is hard to go through life and not let the hurts we experience from others get the best of us. If we are not careful, we can get so stuck at looking at the hurt that has come our way, that we learn how to play the role of the forever victim, pushed down because of the pain and hurt that we have experienced. When we start to live, afraid of being hurt and victimized, we actually open ourselves up to more hurt and more victimization.

It is healthiest when we can find a way to look to God, to help us move beyond the hurt or challenges and not dwell on it. There is a lady who learned how to do this in her life. Her name is Gert.

She sent the pastor a letter marked, "Please give to Harry the Usher." It was handed over to Harry, and this is what it said:

"Dear Harry, I'm sorry I don't know your last name, but then, you don't know mine. I'm Gert, Gert at the 10:00 AM service every Sunday. I'm writing to ask a favor. I don't know the pastors too well, but somehow I feel close to you. I don't know how you got to know my first name, but every Sunday morning you smile and greet me by my

name, and we exchange a few words: how bad the weather is, how much you like my hat, and how I am late on a particular Sunday. I just wanted to say thank you for taking the time to remember an old woman, for the smiles, for your consideration, for your thoughtfulness.

"Now for the favor. I am dying, Harry. My husband has been dead for sixteen years, and the kids are scattered. It is very important to me that when they bring me to church for the last time, you will be there to say, 'Hello, Gert. Good to see you.' If you are there, Harry, I will feel assured that your warm hospitality will be duplicated in my new home in heaven.

"With love and gratitude, Gert."

Gert could have dwelt on how terrible it is to be dying. Instead, she chose to turn to God, to look to God and work at moving beyond the hurt. Along the way, she reached out to someone she knew would help her.

It is not always easy to be in relationships with other people. Sometimes we look at things differently. Sometimes we know how to get under another person's skin. But are you willing to not do harm to another? Are you willing to forgive others? Are you willing to focus on God when you have been hurt, instead of dwelling on the hurt?

May God help us as we deal with the challenges of living.

Amen