

God — The Most Important Relationship of All

April 19, 1995 will go down in our country's history as one of our worst days of tragedy because of the bomb that devastated the federal building in Oklahoma City. Pieces of the building, concrete and steel, shards of glass and even the blood of the people who were in it were spread ten blocks away. The sound of the explosion could be heard 30 miles distant. But it's almost as if the pieces scattered everywhere in America, almost as if the shards of glass pierced us all, almost as if the blood was splattered on the entire nation.

One of the headlines in the Minneapolis Star Tribune said "Bomb takes us a step closer to the end of innocence." For all of us, fear has grown a little bit larger. Americans everywhere are wondering, is there any place safe to go? Is there any place we can go to escape the threat of terror that can assault us? And so the entire nation, it seems, is talking about what happened, asking all kinds of questions to which few of us seem to have very many answers.

There is one thing that has impressed me more than anything else, in all the conversations and in all of the news stories, and that is the overwhelming focus upon relationships. Comparatively little has been said about the bomb construction or about the enormous dollar cost or the political implications. Most of it has been the stories of people, the stories of innocent little children in a day care center who died, or of rescue workers traumatized after long hours of work and horrible sights hurrying home to pick up their children, holding them tighter and longer than they ever have before. Our hearts have ached for parents who are still wondering where

their children are and what happened to them, for young adults who know that parents were working in that federal office building or grandparents had stopped by the Social Security Office. It's the stories of people that grip us — the heroism of fire fighters and the courage of nurses and physicians.

I was impressed that when the governor of the state of Oklahoma stood before the television cameras knowing that what he said would go around the world, what he talked about most was about his friends whom he knew were in that building and his relationships with them. Psychologists have advised that people should talk these things through with friends and family and with their children. It should be done in the context of friendships and family. That is one of the marvelous purposes that relationships provide. How tragic it is for those who have no one that they can talk to, no one with whom they can discuss or process the hollowness, the pain and the fear.

It has fascinated me that on this occasion this nation, unlike most of the time, has not focused our attention upon celebrities. The heroes of the headlines and the people whose pictures we see on television are not rock stars or famous athletes or powerful politicians. The pictures are of crying babies, fatigued workers laboring around the clock, people

who are weeping over the dead bodies of strangers. The physicians and nurses are not screen actors from

ER or Chicago Hope but ordinary people whose names none of us would recognize.

This experience has said in a powerful way that when we are shaken to the very core

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of our being, it is relationships that count the most — not how old we are, not how good looking, not how famous and powerful, not any of the things that so often seem to be so all-important in our society. It is relationships. If life's most important relationships are good it seems that nothing else really matters and that we are able to endure the worst of tragedies. If life's most important relationships are bad — if they are hostile or broken — then we can have the best of health, wealth, power and fame and somehow it's not good enough.

Of all of the relationships that we have, which is most important? Is it not our relationship with God? For if it is good, everything else is better. If it is bad, nothing else is ever quite right. The reason for that is both profound and simple.

The reason our relationship to God is most important is because we were created for our relationship to him — it is the way we were made. We were designed that way. The first page of the Bible explains that God created us in his image. That means that we are like God in terms of intelligence and emotion, and that we have souls that live forever. But it is more than that. It means that when God made us he designed us to have a good relationship with him. It is the way we were meant to be.

It's not just that we were created to be like God; we were created for God. Colossians 1:16 says that "all things were created by him and for him." It's like the eyeglasses that we wear. My prescription was made uniquely to compensate for my astigmatism, my farsightedness, to recognize that my left eye does not see anywhere near as well as my right eye. Without my glasses, everything is out of focus. I can get a headache if I leave them off

too long, but when I put them on everything comes into focus and I feel much better. On the other hand, if you pick up my glasses and wear them, everything will be out of focus and you'll probably get a headache from wearing my prescription.

God created every one of us to fit with him, to match — a custom fit. Without God, life is like a migraine. Without him we are pretty much useless. Without him we cannot make much sense out of all that happens around us. But when we have a right relationship with God even the worst of things can turn to good things. When we have that supernatural custom fit with God then that affects all the other relationships of life. If we have a wrong relationship with him, then marriage and friendships, job and all the other connections that we make in life are always out of sync, never what they should be.

The problem is that we really don't have a right relationship with God. It's not just that occasionally we're at a distance or that sometimes we have bad feelings that crop us between us and God. No, in fact, it is outright alienation.

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God explains that himself in the New Testament in Colossians 1. "You were alienated from God and were en-

emies in your minds because of your evil behavior." God is saying that sin has ruined our relationship with him and because of human misbehavior we have become enemies with God when we should be the very best of friends. Sin is like a disease that we contracted at birth and increasingly act out throughout our lives.

We all understand what an alienated relationship is like. We see a couple very much in love making serious and solemn vows de-

clarifying their love and promising their commitment to each other for a lifetime and then, because of sinful misbehavior, they become the worst of enemies — lovers turned into enemies. Or it is the alienation between people who are the best of friends but then something goes terribly wrong and the best of friends come to hate each other. It's alienation. It's where there once was a closeness between a mother and a daughter that is replaced by harsh animosity and an unwillingness to forgive so that they won't even speak to each other anymore. It's the alienation of relationship between all the American people and those that perpetrated the bombing in Oklahoma City. That's alienation, there's a hostility that is there.

It is a sad thing when people who seem meant for each other become alienated. It's a sad thing when something that was so good turns so tragically wrong. But there is no breach of relationship that is quite so sad as for any of us who are created in the image of God — so that everything that makes us who we are is a custom fit to him — to be alienated from our creator. And it is an especially great tragedy when it's not just some theoretical statement in the Bible about humankind but when it's me and you who are alienated from our creator.

Please understand that I am not saying that this kind of alienation with God can happen. I'm saying that it has happened. It has happened to all of us. Our whole human race went down together. We are all alienated from God. We were born with a bad relationship to him and unless it is fixed, we are doomed to disaster and we will never benefit from what is clearly meant to be the best possible relationship of life.

The only remedy for alienation between

people is reconciliation. Reconciliation is putting a relationship back the way it is supposed to be. It is turning enemies into friends.

One of the delights and one of the heartbreaks of being a pastor is watching what happens to peoples' relationships. I've performed the wedding ceremony for couples who seemed meant for each other, yet later that relationship crumbles to the point that there are court orders to keep them apart. It's tragic to see that happen to a relationship. I've also seen reconciliations where two people reach out to one another and deal with their differences and bridge the gap. There aren't words

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to describe the thrill of remarrying couples like that. To hear the vows said a second time with a depth and a sincerity and an appreciation that per-

haps they did not have the first time around.

And that's what Jesus did for us. Listen to these words from Colossians 1: 19-22:

God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him (Jesus), and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.

When Jesus died on the cross, he reached out to alienated us in order to make us friends with God. It's marvelous! But it takes two to make a reconciliation work. We have to be willing to become friends with God. We must accept God's love. We must accept Christ's death. We must accept our own forgiveness.

That is precisely what it means to become a Christian — to become reconciled or to become friends instead of enemies with God — to accept Jesus Christ as our reconciler.

Then what? Any good relationship requires some work, some responsibility. It especially requires love if that relationship is to be all that it was intended to be and if that relationship is to be made strong. Jesus explained how to make strong our relationship with God. He said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind (Matthew 22:37).” Once we have been reconciled to God it is our responsibility to make that relationship strong from our side. Love is a wonderful strengthener of any relationship.

Last week I was out of town for several days and just before I was picked up to go to the airport, I grabbed a piece of paper and wrote a note to my wife, Charleen, and taped it on the headboard of our bed. It said, “Don’t forget: I love you!” I still had a few minutes to spare so I got a post-it note and with my limited artistic ability I made a heart and put each of our initials on it and put it in the middle of the bathroom mirror. I called her each night and we talked about everything that had happened that day. When I came back home, she picked me up at the airport and the first thing we said to each other is, “I love you.” And then I said, “Let’s go out to dinner,” and we went to a favorite restaurant of hers. All of these things were because I know that love makes a relationship strong. It is something that has to be done. It’s something that has to be worked at, nurtured and developed.

It is the same with God. We become Christians by accepting the reconciliation that comes through faith in Jesus Christ as Sav-

ior. Then once the reconciliation has taken place, every day we make our relationship with God stronger and better by loving Him with heart and soul and mind. That includes telling God, “I love you.” There ought not be a day ever that a Christian lets slip by without telling God at least once, “I love you.” We ought to write notes to him. We ought to talk to him every single day about what happens in our life.

Hear it again — relationships are more important than anything else in life and the

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relationship with God is the most important of all. So, how is your relationship with God? Is it very

good? Or are you enemies? Alienated? Or are you reconciled through Jesus and the best of friends?

It is up to you. It is up to each of us, and it could not be more important. Be reconciled. Be friends and love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind. It is the most important relationship of all.

Faith Matters is the Broadcast Ministry of
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
612-944-6300
www.wooddale.org
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