Relationships – It’s Complicated

Greeting – and intro: We’ve spent the last couple of weeks talking about how we handle our relationship status. If you’re familiar with how this is depicted on social media, then you know our culture defines relationship very differently from what God has designed and desires. In the last couple of weeks we’ve seen that many of our relationships are often in a state of confusion because we’ve allowed our sexuality to become so convoluted.

Our culture also creates a great deal of pressure on our romantic relationships and tends to be dismissive when it comes to valuing singleness. All of these are areas that God not is only concerned with, but has a plan and a design for.

Today in the final segment of this sermon series, we’re going to look at a term often used to describe relationships that are experiencing friction: “it’s complicated”. Marriages can get rocky, friendships can be up in the air. Parents and children go at each other.

What in the world are we supposed to do with “complicated” in a relationship? Is it a good thing, a bad thing, something to be avoided?

Well, let’s start with Kings Dominion. If you’re new to Southside, you might be asking “*how is she going to make a theme park spiritual*?” Well, challenge accepted. Let me try. (**Zach riding the boat at Kings Dominion**.)

What would possess a little kid to ditch the Charlie Brown merry-go-round and ride the whooshy boat over and over? Well it was probably because the whoosh ride was more interesting. There was more to it.

There’s a lesson in there for us: God did not put you on this earth to live a mundane, boring, empty life. God intended for followers of Christ to live lives that are purposeful and full of discovery.

1 Corinthians 7:17 (CEB) “*Nevertheless, each person should live the kind of life that the Lord assigned when he called each one*.”

Fulfillment means we have rich, authentic relationships with people.

**SLIDE 1** We were created for community by a God who is the essence of community. Relationships are part and parcel of who we are meant to be.

And its fair to ask if God designed relationships, why do they get so complicated? Well the easy answer to that is because *people* are complicated!

Grab some personality traits, throw in experiences, culture, and background and *voila!* You get a deliciously complicated person. So it stands to reason that many relationship complications arise out of the simple fact that we’re complicated individuals.

You stick a normal, complicated person in a situation and that alone can be fun to watch, but your put two complicated people together and what do you get? You get some wonderfully messy, complicated relationships.

I’m going to go out on a limb here, but I don’t think God meant for all of our relationships to be simple and one dimensional. I’m sorry, but that would be boring. Do you want your relationships to be: the whooshy boat ride or the boring merry-go-round?

And where did we ever get the idea that complicated has to automatically mean “bad”?

**SLIDE 2** You know what some of the synonyms for the word ‘complicated’ are? Complex, intricate, involved, sophisticated. Word thing That doesn’t sound bad; that sounds interesting and full of potential.

Complex math gives us space exploration and airline travel. Complicated music gives us Beethoven and 90’s grunge music. In sports, a sophisticated strategy gets you a Super Bowl ring. In cuisine, complicated chemistry gives us cheesecake and that, friends, is a reason to celebrate.

Complicated does not have to be a negative thing. It’s when we allow our natural inclinations towards selfishness and self-centeredness to take over that “complicated” stops acting as the potential for intricate and sophisticated and instead opens the door for arduous and problematic.

Our culture defines complicated relationships as connections that are marked by deception and valuing someone only for what you can get from them. That’s not complicated – that’s toxic and that’s not what God had in mind when he gave us the gift of relationship.

We are meant for so much more than selfish and toxic. It’s why the Apostle Paul told the believers in Rome don’t be conformed to the patterns of the world; don’t let the culture drag you down to its level. Be transformed by God so that you can follow God’s amazing will for your life.

Complication in genuine relationships stems from what we talked about earlier – complexity in people leads to complexity in relationships.

**SLIDE 3** In God’s relationship design, “complicated” is defined like this: it is “complex people possessing an attitude of sacrificial love who navigate circumstances in a way that is mutually beneficial.” You know what’s scary about that? It takes hard work. It takes self-sacrifice. It takes perseverance and strength of character.

Seriously, it takes the transforming power of Jesus! And unfortunately when we allow fear of complication to drive our relationships, we adopt an unhealthy cycle of shutting down and avoiding instead of nurturing genuine relationship. (**relative with restaurants**)

Sooner or later my relative is going to run out of places to eat out. You see the connection there? If you decide to withdraw and avoid every time your relationships get complicated, you’re going to run out of people to be in relationship with.

Authentic relationships are ones where both parties can be raw and real. By default that means they are going to get messy and complicated. Remember, we’re complex, multi-dimensional people. And that means our relationships are going to reflect that. Don’t let the selfishness of your sin nature rob you of the potential to be found in complex relationships.

Whether its your marriage, your friendships, your family, your parent/child dynamic – all healthy, close relationships are going to have some semblance of complicated. They have to in order to have any kind of depth.

The key to finding health in those relationships is how you decide to view and utilize “complicated”. When we embrace the potential of complicated, we open ourselves to a world of intimacy, creative problem-solving, and rich spiritual and emotional growth.

Nowhere is this modeled for us so well as in the group Jesus decided to gather together during his earthly ministry. This group of men is most commonly referred to as the 12 Disciples. I like to think of them more as the Dirty Dozen.

Thinking of them as simply being 12 Jewish men who shared a common culture and upbringing is vastly underestimating the task Jesus took on when he gathered them together.

**SLIDE 4** Too often, much of what we see in art depicts them as what’s pictured in this painting (**Picture 1**); this unified, unselfish group that followed their rabbi together, just soaking in his teaching.

**SLIDE 5**  When I read about some of the dumb things they said and did, I get a picture that looks more like this. (**Picture 2**). If you look closely you can see Jesus in the middle – he’s the one with the referee uniform and the protective mask. To say his group was complicated is an understatement. From what we know of the Gospel writers, they were quite a mix of personalities.

* Take Peter and Thomas. Peter is our much loved loud mouth whose motto was “shoot first, ask questions later”. Contrast him to introspective Thomas, somewhat skeptical and probably a thinker by nature. If you want to visualize these two put yourself back in 3rd grade. You were one of two kids: you were either Peter, who shouted out the answer before anyone could raise their hand or you were Thomas, the one who was secretly pleased when the teacher put the Peter in the corner for talking too much. Peter and Thomas in the same group made things complicated.
* Jesus also chose two brothers, James and John, whom he called Boanerges, which means “Sons of Thunder”. This probably came from their kind offer to electrocute those who disagreed with them. These two were probably the reason the quieter, more introverted disciples would offer to go get bread from town. Anything just to get away from those two hotheads.
* The most humorous contrast had to be Simon the Zealot and Matthew the Tax Collector. Simon was part of a political party that despised the Roman government and staged insurrections to overthrow them. As a tax collector, Matthew was basically a Roman stooge who added insult to injury by stealing from his own people. You can’t tell me there wasn’t tension in the room when these guys first got together.
* Let’s not forget that aside from the 12 called Apostles, a number of women joined Jesus’s group and became the first evangelists after the resurrection. At a time when the testimony of women was not even considered valid in legal proceedings, why would Jesus allow women to learn and become part of this effort?

Here we have the most important mission in the history of mankind – the redemption of humanity through the work and ministry of Jesus. And what does he do? He puts together a complex, involved, *complicated* group of individuals to act as the vehicle through which the Gospel would be spread worldwide. Why not a homogenous group to keep tempers and tensions at a minimum?

**SLIDE 6**  Obviously Jesus saw value in deploying a diversely gifted group of individuals to advance his redemptive mission.

I believe God allows for “complicated” in relationships because it’s good for us. First, complicated in relationships serves…

**To grow us** – Complexity in relationships teaches us humility. Humility provides room for God to work in us. “*Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you*.” Humility is a must for anyone following Jesus. And please know you are in capable hands when you trust Jesus to grow you. Ravi Zacharias says of this humbling process, “God alone knows how to humble you without humiliating you and how to exalt you without flattering you.” The Psalmist said it beautifully: “*He leads the humble in what is right, and teaches the humble his way*.”

God works in and through our circumstances, but God *grows* people. Philippians 1:6 (CEB) “*I’m sure about this: the one who started a good work in you will stay with you to complete the job by the day of Christ Jesus*.” The verb “complete” there is the Greek word, epiteleō (epi-tah-layo) and it carries the connotation of bringing something to its beautifully finished state.

The tension in your relationships can and will serve as an opportunity for God to grow you if you are willing to be humble. It’s easy for us to look at others and think, “Well I know where this person needs to grow”, but that perspective doesn’t come from a place of humility – that’s pride talking.

Humility acknowledges that the only person whose actions we can control are our own. No matter how persuasive or charming we are, we cannot make someone else think differently, feel differently, or adopt a different perspective. We can certainly influence people, but we can’t change them.

The only Someone who can change a person on a soul level is the Holy Spirit. You’re human and you don’t have that power or that authority. That means if you believe there’s some growing to do in a relationship, your efforts need to be focused on what changes need to occur in you.

Yes, in all likelihood the other person needs to grow. But humility dictates that you leave it to the Holy Spirit to work on the heart and mind of that person. And here’s the challenge in that – when you pray for someone, be mindful of how you pray. Are you praying selfishly?

**SLIDE 7**  Are you asking God to change someone to suit you or suit Him? Are you praying for someone for their good or for yours?

Humility allows you to do the difficult task of looking at yourself and asking, “*Where do I need to grow-up*?” When we view complicated in relationships as an opportunity, we gift ourselves with the prospect of learning how we can grow and become more Christ-like. The whole dynamic of complicated changes. It’s not God change that other person – it’s becomes God change me. God mature me.

**Complicated also exists to teach us patience** – In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul shares an earth shattering reality: “Love is patient”. We cannot intentionally love one another or others if we do not cultivate patience. It’s the very first result named in Paul’s list of what a Holy Spirit led-life looks like.

Can I just be raw here? If whoever is tasked with one day designing my tombstone decides to write “*She was patient*” on it, either my husband or one of my children would be completely within their rights to sneak in one night and scratch the word “not” in the appropriate place. I sometimes feel l like I have a genetic disorder that precludes me from being patient. I’m not good at lines, I’m not good at waiting on other people. I’m not always good at putting myself in someone else’s perspective.

I’m told the first step in seeking help is admitting you have a problem. So – public – here I am. I’m pretty sure I’m not alone on this. And because patience with others is foundational for how we love others, God in his mercy (and humor) has made sure to bring me an endless supply of people with whom I can practice patience.

In all seriousness, navigating complicated relationships gives us the opportunity to learn and practice patience. Its like going to the gym – staring at the weights does not build muscle. You can stare at those things all day long – nothing is going to happen.

Its only when you start picking them up and working with them that you begin to see results. Dealing with the complexities of authentic relationships literally flexes that patience muscle in your brain and strengthens our ability to love others with the kind of sacrificial love that Christ calls us to.

**Lastly, I think God allows for complicated in relationships to cultivate genuine unity** – Followers of Jesus. Let’s just have a moment here, ok? If you aren’t a follower yet, that’s ok this is for you too. But followers, our Lord and our Savior gave us some specific instructions. Scripture, God’s word to us, is very clear here. “*By your love for one another others will know you are from me*.”

Listen to the prayer Jesus offered for us, recorded by John. (BTW, I love John – his relationship with the others was obviously complicated because when he records finding out about the resurrection, he actually includes a brag moment about winning a foot race to the tomb with Peter.)

John 17:20-23 (NIV) “*My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one - I in them and you in me - so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me*.”

We are called to unity. That does not mean we will see every detail of every aspect of existence the same way.

**SLIDE 8**  As Ravi Zacharias often says, “*Unity of belief does not always mean uniformity of expression*.” We may not agree on everything, especially in areas where the Bible doesn’t shout an answer. Don’t hear what I’m not saying. Scripture is very clear when it comes to our salvation. It’s very clear in areas that God has deemed sacred. Life, sexuality, greed, drunkenness – the Bible speaks loud and clear. But there are other places where Scripture whispers. Where the Holy Spirit guides and tells you to use truth to discern and think. And its in these areas we can become dogmatic and judgmental. That’s the opposite of unity.

We’re in an election year. I’m already at the point where I just want to vote absentee and then spend the rest of the year on Disney’s island in the Caribbean. The vitriol that I’m seeing - not in the public but in the Church - is painful. Let me just be abrupt here: Christian, why would the word “they” need to come out of your mouth when you are talking about a fellow believer? Yes we can disagree. Remember, we’re complicated. We’re in real relationships. We aren’t going to see everything the same but, followers of Jesus, we should be the model – the standard - for how to disagree on gray areas in a civil, productive manner. For that matter, we ought to be modeling how to speak truth on black and white matters in love and gentleness.

Now all this sounds great and maybe even a little bit churchy, but if we allow withdrawal and avoidance to dictate how we deal with the complexity God allows in relationships, then we are derailing the very processes by which the Holy Spirit seeks to grow and shape us. I want to share a clip from an old movie “Parenthood” with you. You’ll see a husband and wife with two very different views on how to handle a problem in their family. As they discuss, the husband’s elderly grandmother enters the picture. Up until now, no one has taken her character seriously as she’s supposed to be sweetly confused and absent minded. But get a load of the wisdom she lays down in a critical moment.

(**Scene from Parenthood**) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MU7iQVx8G4s> Relationships are complicated. Our culture would have you believe that complicated is a green light for acting toxic and selfish. But God allows complicated not as means of pursuing selfish desires, but as means of taking the world by storm. Healthy complicated in relationships allows a diversely gifted group of believers to further the kingdom work of redemption in this world.

So, you have to answer Grandma’s question. Do you want the roller coaster or the merry-go round? Like my son, do you want the whooshy ride or the boring one? You have to decide. Is complicated going to be the potential for intricate and sophisticated or a pathway to shutting down and avoiding?

Where do you need to grow? With whom do you need to practice patience? Where, follower of Jesus, have you failed to cultivate unity?

Where can you step into the messy and the complicated and grab on to the roller coaster that God has designed you for – full of excitement, tension, resolution, exhaustion, and exhilaration?

What relationships have you nearly discarded that God wants to work redemptively through the complicated to bring restoration?