

How to love your neighbour

We need to care for ourselves so we can better care for others

Josi Peters
ChristianWeek Columnist

GOOD COUNSEL

"I'm just so tired," my client sobbed. "I do everything for everybody, my husband, my kids, my single-mom sister, and my aging parents. 'When is it ever going to be my turn?'"

When I suggested it would be her turn as soon as she chose to take her turn, she responded that she would feel selfish if she tried that. "After all," she sighed, "There are so many needs in my family. And didn't Jesus say to 'love thy neighbour?' He sacrificed everything for us, even His life. Surely I should be doing the same?"

"Well, let's look at that," I responded. "You may recall that what Jesus said was to 'love thy

neighbour as thyself.'" She nodded. So far, so good, I thought and continued, "What do you suppose is the most important word in that sentence?"

"Love," she responded, exactly as I expected, exactly as many clients with similar problems before her had done. I put on my most thoughtful face and suggested gently, "Perhaps the most important word in that perfect advice from our Lord is as."

I took her puzzled frown as permission to continue. Not wanting to turn the session into a grammar lesson, I went straight to the heart of the words. "As tells us how we can achieve this task, how this life-counsel that Jesus gave us actually becomes possible for us to follow."

That little word tells us that we are to care for the needs of others in the same way that we care for

our own needs. As much as we want good things for ourselves, we are to want them for others. As much as we work to ensure that we have sufficient rest, adequate food, clothing, shelter, and recreation, we are to help ensure these for our neighbours. That is what empathy, a trait that Jesus embodied so well, is all about.

And Jesus also embodied respect for His own needs and healthy self-care when He withdrew, or even snuck away and hid, from the needy crowds in times when He grew weary and needed to replenish his strength.

Jesus took time to rest and commune with His Father, the source of His energy and the heart of His compassion for His neighbour. Like Mary, he occasionally left the work to someone else while He nourished Himself. We, too, have to be careful we don't become

the Martha who is so weary and comes to resent the work of caring for others.

As we discussed this more thoroughly and speculated how my client could apply this new way of thinking to her own situation, I watched her gloom lift. She could even chuckle, imagining how certain people would respond initially to her new boundaries.

"The best part," she enthused, "is that now I'll be able to love people more than ever, because I'll always have enough energy for it."

"Perhaps," she decided, "being self-ish, isn't so bad after all, not if it empowers me to love others better."

Josi Peters is a wife, mother, grandmother, and professional counsellor, working with clients in the Steinbach, Manitoba location of Recovery of Hope Counselling Services.

Losing yourself and moments of true intimacy

Drawing our example from God's divine love



Thomas Froese
ChristianWeek Columnist

It was a summer Sunday and communion was finished and so was the sermon and they stood, both of them, old and gray and a little stooped. And we all clapped for some time to say 'congratulations' and 'thank you,' too.

This, in a Hamilton church, a moment to show that even after 60 years of marriage you can still stand as man and wife and smile at the world, and smile with the sort of lines that show old things like truth all over your face.

It's something to think about as marriage hits hard times.

Hard times for marriage

The number of Americans getting married is at an all-time low. The rate of marriage in Europe has halved in the past 40 years. In

Canada, for the first time, unmarried adults now outnumber the married. Even in developing nations—with the exception of South America and parts of south Asia—marriage is down.

Of course, there are many good reasons not to marry. But simply going with culture's flow, one that often hurts abandoned children, is not one of them. Neither is the fear of losing yourself.

I know this whenever my wife sits at the piano in our home and plays a certain song, one she first played on our wedding day, in her full wedding dress, a creative piece composed just for me, one that showed a deep giving of herself.

Somehow through that music, even though she barely knew me, really, my wife captured the essence of who I am, at least who I am in my better moments, something joyous and boyish, something I maybe didn't even see in myself. It makes my blood jump even now because now is when we celebrate our own anniversary.

And also because when we do this for our loved ones, when we capture their essence in any form that we can muster, we're doing something else. We're pointing to it all: to faith and hope and love, to that well-known passage that's read at weddings everywhere.

Doing what God does

That is, when we capture a person's essence we're doing what God does. Not that we can see God fully. As Paul so eloquently put it, for now we can see only dimly, like through a dark glass.

But one day we'll see our Creator face to face. We'll know Him intimately. And on that day He'll somehow capture our deepest essence in a way that goes beyond anything we can ever imagine.

This isn't to say that marriage is an easy sail. If it was, then those vows wouldn't include "for better or worse." Nor is it to say that marriage is some higher

way. Jesus never married and He never suggested that married people live a more valued existence.

But Jesus did have something to say about letting a seed fall into the ground and letting it die and then seeing new life to come from it.

Which is to say that marriage will always be one way—and for many people the best way—to give and receive certain things, certain losses and gains that enrich our lives, remarkable things, really, that we'd otherwise find hard to discover.

It's funny. When you have something, then give it away, you're left with nothing. This is what we know from math and logic. But with marriage, you give yourself and then you find more of, well, yourself.

It's not a bad deal, really. Even if fewer people are willing to go for it.

Thomas Froese writes about international issues. Visit him at www.thomasfroese.com or at his blog on fatherhood at www.dailydad.net.