

FOUNDATIONS FOR FRIENDSHIP AND MATURITY

Sunday, 25th August, 2019 Sermon by Rev. Geoff. Usher

GROW is a world-wide mental health movement, originally set up as a support group for people who had suffered from psychiatric illness, or mental or emotional breakdown. It later expanded to include preventive work for people who may be lonely, upset, or going through difficult personal times.

Its aim is: "Personal maturity through mutual help groups in a caring and sharing community".

Personal maturity through mutual help groups in a caring and sharing community. Isn't that the sort of aim that we should be able to have as a congregation? especially the "caring and sharing community"?

A leaflet about GROW includes these words:

The love of friends requires something more than ordinary adult love. Friendship is *a love of intimate sharing between mature equals.*

To basic adult love friendship adds a common philosophy of life and support and mutual leadership for life as a whole. You can love certain people whom you do not like, but a friend is one whom you like and admire, and in whose company you are profoundly at home.

The word "friend" is used for three levels of friendship. These are:

- * friends for play or leisure
- * friends for work or advantage
- * friends for living.

The first two kinds are valid, useful and worthwhile, but only the last, friends for living, are friends in the strict and truest sense.

Friendship is not possible without considerable maturity, for friendship is in fact *shared maturity*; and the sign and gauge of one's maturity is precisely one's capacity to be a friend.

GROW sets up five Foundations for Maturity:

- * Understanding
- * Acceptance
- * Confidence
- * Control
- * Love

UNDERSTANDING

This means being aware of another person's foibles, interests, background. It means knowing "what makes him/her tick".

It is not necessary to agree. It does not mean trying to judge or evaluate, or to change the person's past. The aim of Understanding is simply to understand the experiences which the person has had which have helped to shape his/her character, perceptions, reactions to the world.

How often have we seen someone acting "oddly", and then learned something that led to our saying "That explains it"?

How often do we accept or take for granted an action or behaviour of a friend or relative that we

would consider strange in a stranger? (Forgive the play on words.)

How many parents comment on the behaviour of other people's children (they are spoilt, demanding, sulky, rude, moody ...), but accept the same behaviour from their own children?

When we know people better -- more intimately -- we are more likely to understand them and less likely to try to categorise or stereotype or label them.

ACCEPTANCE

I have already indicated the close link between understanding and acceptance. There is no attempt to change the other person -- to make him/her fit a mould that we think is more desirable.

That does NOT mean that we should refrain completely from saying anything harsh or critical.

If a friend's action angers or upsets you, you have the right . (perhaps even a duty) to express and explain your feelings; but you need to do so without blaming. Eg: "I feel angry ..." (taking personal responsibility) rather than "You make me angry" (blaming).

Lao Tzu wrote: "Those who conquer others are strong; those who conquer themselves are mighty."

Can you accept that your friend/colleague/neighbour has taste/values/ideas different from yours?

Can you express your own tastes/values/ideas without trying to impose them onto the other person?

Do another person's ideas and so on lead (or even tempt) you to reject the person?

Krishnamurti wrote: "Conflict ceases when there is no sense of otherness."

We need to remember: Not only at the international and national levels, but also at the local/

community/personal level, co-operation is not a sentiment, but an economic and social necessity.

Richard S Gilbert wrote:

We meet on holy ground.
Brought into being as life encounters life,
As personal histories merge into the communal
story,
As we take on the pride and pain of our
companions;
As separate selves become community.

How desperate is our need for one another;
Our silent beckoning to our neighbours,
Our invitations to share life and death together,
Our welcome into the lives of those we meet,
And their welcome into our own."

There is a similar idea in "The Community of the Church" by Celia Midgley, which I sometimes use to open Committee meetings:

Let us move away from those things which divide
and separate ...
Consider for a while the comfort and richness of
spirit
That comes from dependence on one another.

In spite of our differences, and because of them,
We meet here regularly and are met here today
In the knowledge that we are all equal under the
roof of the church.
May we be humbled by the recognition
That no-one is more important than another ...
And yet, each of us is important, has worth, as a
person.

CONFIDENCE

Jesus declared: "The good news that I bring you is
that heaven is within."

Richard A Kellaway wrote a meditation entitled "Beyond Blame to Responsibility":

"How often we blame our inadequacies on the inanimate! As a clumsy child I lived in a world of imagination filled with malevolent physical forces. Nails purposely bent to prevent me from constructing magnificent things. Tools carefully hid themselves to thwart my ambitions, only mockingly to reappear in an obvious place when no longer needed. And a baseball bounding across the grass towards my usual outfield exile would become slippery or bounce badly or would otherwise gleefully elude by anxious pursuit. In the rage of my frustration I often imagined that things were conspiring together to prevent anything ever working the way I wanted."

The primitive mentality still believes in the malevolent spirit of the rock that struck the man. I still find myself capable of cursing inanimate objects with a splendid vehemence which reveals my continuing suspicion of evil intent in things. My distrust, however, sometimes moves beyond the realm of objects to persons and fate itself. In moments of anxiety, I can still imagine that destructive and sinister forces are at work to prevent my success in achieving the central goals of my life. I half expect things to go wrong when I need most to succeed.

Sometimes they do. More often than not the reasons are obvious -- lack of preparation, lack of skill, lack of patience. Often we find ourselves expending tremendous quantities of time and emotional energy on very small tasks which others seem to deal with easily. What has gone wrong is usually us. The destructive and sinister forces which we are tempted to blame live within ourselves. They are the acting out of the uneasy infant still afraid to be free. For all our heroic imagining, it is hard to be easy in adulthood, to accept the power and responsibility

which come with maturity.

When intelligence makes it perfectly clear what steps are necessary to achieve a particular goal and we do not take them, it helps to ask, "Why?", to examine the factors which lead us to fail when we have the potential to succeed. When the process of finding something or someone to blame begins, I have learned to look for an infant imagination at work creating mishaps and finding reasons to act out a fear of growing up. The capacity for realistic response begins when we have grown beyond the need to blame. (The Trying Out pp 20-22)

Remember:; The most powerful force we have is what we say to ourselves and believe.

CONTROL

If we have achieved the first three foundations (Understanding, Acceptance and Confidence), then the fourth will follow fairly easily and naturally, although it will not come automatically.

We need to work for it, and to keep working on it., like a car that needs regular tuning and maintenance -- and sometimes major overhaul!

We can develop techniques:

We can count to ten before losing our temper.

We can listen to what another person is saying, and follow the logic and the line of the argument or explanation, without interrupting and without concentrating on our own rebuttal or counter-argument or objection. Remember: listening is not the same as waiting to speak. We can try to learn what makes us angry, and why we are angry; and then choose not to allow it to anger us.

Nothing can make us happy if we choose to be unhappy, and nothing can make us unhappy if we

choose to be happy.

We can choose to be a friend. To have a friend you must first be a friend.

Some years ago there was a slogan about "Mental Vitamins for Worldpeace": "The people who like people are the people people like." (It's a bit like the old song "It's men like you who make women like me go crazy over men like you".)

LOVE

I don't mean sappy, romantic, holding-hands-in-the-cinema, girlfriend-boyfriend love, but the kind of love that Jesus had in mind when he said: Love not only your neighbour, but love your enemy.

Jesus didn't simply preach. He practised what he preached, and demonstrated by his daily life and actions what it means to love, and the fact that it is indeed possible to love all sorts and conditions of people.

He reached out his hand to touch the leper.

He loved Simon Peter, even when Peter betrayed him on the night of his arrest.

He loved the prostitute who had sold her body to strangers.

He loved 'the scribes and Pharisees'. He disagreed with them, but went with them to their homes, talked with them, tried to understand them and to help them to understand him.

He loved the soldiers who carried out the order to crucify him. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

In the famous thirteenth chapter of his First Epistle to the Christians living in Corinth, Paul had some important things to say about the kind of love (or charity) that Jesus taught and embodied.

Love is not something that happens to us, like an accident. "Falling in love", like "falling pregnant", always sounds to me like a disaster, like falling over a high cliff.

The fifth and final foundation for friendship and maturity is not only an essential part of the whole process, but also a splendid result. Love should underpin everything we do as we lay the other four foundations. It is both a goal and a path to that goal.

But it doesn't just happen. We need to make it happen, through our conscious and deliberate decisions.

I finish with more words by Richard S Gilbert:

Love is more than a feeling.
Love is more than an affair of the heart.
It is an act of will -
It is a decision -- commitment - a promise --
A covenant.
It is when the warm glow becomes
A persistent light,
Empowered by an I and a Thou.
It is when the blood pulses in regular rhythm.
It is when the heart beat steadies life together.
It is when feeling is complemented by thought.
It is when two spirits grow in truth.
Love is a decision, a commitment, a promise,
A covenant.
Love is a decision.

Let us make our decision, to love.

Amen.