Out of Bounds

Steve Matthews

“In the Habit” session for use with devozine meditations for July 8–14, 2013.

MAKING THE CONNECTION

“As a kid I enjoyed playing outside, but I was never too great at team sports. So whether I was playing football or soccer or basketball, being penalized for being ‘out of bounds’ was something all too familiar to me. No one wants to go ‘out of bounds,’ but it happens sometimes, even to the best players.

“Sometimes we go ‘out of bounds’ in life too. Life is often hard, and we cope as well as we can. Sometimes, we are able to rouse ourselves, shift our perspective, count our blessings, and surmount the obstacles. At other times, we may need to ask for help from family, friends, our church, and mental health professionals.

“At some point, we will all face life circumstances during which it feels as if we are spending more time out of bounds than inside the limits. These times challenge our sense of well-being and heighten our sense of vulnerability. Making this experience seem normal or common is important so that young people feel free to talk about their concerns and to reach out unashamedly to their Christian community for love and support.

“This week’s session focuses specifically on codependence. Codependence often results from unsuccessful attempts to cope with stressful relationships. Often the person who triggers our behavior may be struggling with an addiction; but our codependent, caretaking, protective responses may also be the result of many shades of volatile, abusive, or manipulative relationships.

“Unfortunately, certain interpretations of scripture and/or the culture of our churches often reinforce codependent behavior. We are taught to be loving, but “loving” often gets twisted into spoken and unspoken rules that encourage us to take care of and to protect people who need to assume responsibility for their own actions.

“By talking about codependence in this session, we are extending an invitation to the young people in your group to talk openly about what it means to be in healthy relationships with one another and with God.” —Steve
MEET THE WRITER
Steve Matthews was a youth minister for more than fifteen years. At present, he is living in central Virginia on a small farm with two cats, one dog, and twenty-two chickens. He loves growing his own food as well as cooking and eating it. Steve is working as a spiritual director and a consultant in the area of “Contemplative Approaches to Ministry.” He is also working on a project with the Episcopal Church (Missio: Engage!) that seeks to systematically redevelop parish ministries struggling with decline. He was a writer for The Way of Pilgrimage: An Adventure in Spiritual Formation for the Next Generation.

STUFF YOU WILL NEED
- (optional) candles and matches
- newsprint—on one sheet write the “Five Warning Signs of Codependency” (from “Exploring the Word”); on another sheet write the four questions (from “Exploring the Word”)
- markers
- Bibles or copies of Mark 3:31–35, Matthew 14:20–25, Matthew 12:1–8
- pens
- index cards
- copies of the closing prayer

PLUGGED IN
A couple of video clips from “Wing Clips” point to the challenges and benefits of facing difficult relationships in our lives:
+ The first is from Friday Night Lights and deals with a star athlete facing the choice of playing college ball and living up to his potential or staying home to take care of his alcoholic mother. (http://www.wingclips.com/movie-clips/friday-night-lights/youre-going-to-fly)
+ The other clip is from the movie Ray and shows a loving mother choosing to let her blind son (Ray Charles) find his own way despite his disability. (http://www.wingclips.com/movie-clips/ray/i-need-help)

If you use these clips, talk about what opportunity is presented in each of the videos as well as suggesting what might happen if nothing changes.

On a lighter note, these songs point to potential codependent themes:
+ “The Minute You’re Gone” by Cliff Richard (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBvAo5AZYJ8)
+ “How Am I Supposed to Live Without You” by Michael Bolton (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YFood_bTOX4)
+ “You’re My World” by Cilia Black (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ttTZL8YPXls)

While romance is a powerful and at times enviable feeling, over-exaggerating romantic feelings may make us feel that we cannot have a happy or complete life without the companionship of a particular person.
CHECKING IN
Begin this time with an opening ritual: a moment of silence, a short prayer that the group says together, or candle-lighting to symbolize Christ’s presence. Take a moment to claim the space and time as holy.

Then invite group members to spend a few minutes in silence, reflecting on the past week. Ask them consider these questions:

What were the high and low points of the week?
What encounters with teachers, friends, strangers, or family members were particularly challenging to you?

After a few minutes of silence, invite volunteers who feel comfortable doing so to talk about a challenging situation, how they handled the encounter, and how they might have handled it better. Encourage people to listen to each other prayerfully and without comment.

EXPLORING THE WORD
Consider showing video clips from Friday Night Lights and Ray as a bridge to this section.

We are always working toward healthy relationships. Human beings are imperfect, and we live in a world that is always changing and often challenging. We don’t need to be ashamed or to blame one another when relationships get off balance; but we do need to notice and to address patterns in our relationships that hinder growth. If, in an effort to deal with stressful situations, we are running out of bounds on a regular basis, some of our relationships may be outside the limits that are healthy for others and ourselves.

Codependency is broad term, used to describe specific unhealthy patterns that may develop in our relationships. Jef Gazley, in his article “Codependency: Definition and Characteristics” (http://www.asktheinternettherapist.com/articles/codependency-information/), defines codependency as “focusing so much on another person’s needs and problems that we forget to take care of our own well-being and emotional health. The inability to say ‘no’ when ‘no’ is warranted, and often putting the thoughts, feelings, and needs of others before your own are red flags of codependency.” Patti Peterson, in her article “Addicted to an Addict? 5 Warning Signs of Codependency” (http://pattipeterson.com/?p=1248) lists these characteristics of a codependent relationship:

1. Taking responsibility for others
2. Putting someone else’s feelings above your own
3. Going to extremes to hold onto a relationship
4. Difficulty recognizing and communicating emotions
5. Inability to set and maintain personal boundaries

Of course, we are not talking about occasional codependent actions. Sometimes it is courteous and kind to be helpful and sensitive to others, even if it costs us. But when we engage in helpful actions that become patterns or coping strategies for stressful relationships (and fail to nurture
our own God-given belovedness) or when our caretaking inhibits someone from discovering the joys and consequences of an autonomous life, we may have gone beyond the scope of what God intended.

When we look at Jesus’ life and ministry, we see that Jesus was grounded in who he was and confident that his life had a purpose he needed to honor. He maintained strong friendships with people; and at the same time, he continued to live into his own belovedness, fleshing out God’s call on his life.

Invite the group to consider the three passages suggested for this session: Mark 3:31–35, Matthew 14:20–23, Matthew 12:1–8. You may decide to ask people to form three groups or to work together in one large group. Ask them to read each passage and to discuss these questions:

- With whom does Jesus interact in the story?
- What would be an unhealthy response to the people? If Jesus had acted in a codependent way, how would he have responded?
- What was healthy about Jesus’ response?
- How does Jesus stay true to himself and his purpose?

Record on the newsprint the group’s answers. Then invite group members to reflect on anything they notice about the answers they have generated.

**SHARING IN PRAYER**

Invite group members into a short period of silent prayer. Then ask them to slowly read aloud the words of this prayer:

“Dear God, please help us to be available to those who have a genuine need. Help us to remember that you are God and that we are not. Lead us to say no to those we have been rescuing and for whom we have been taking responsibility. Help us to see our own needs, to be responsible for our behavior, to nurture our growth, to honor our belovedness, and to respond to our sense of call. Thank you for hearing and answering our prayer. Gratefully, in Jesus' name, we pray. Amen.

**TAKING IT FURTHER**

- Distribute the index cards and pens. Invite people to consider the “Five Warning Signs of Codependency” and to write down the one that is most likely to cause them to go out of bounds. Next, ask group members to identify one person in their lives who is most likely to evoke this response from them. Then ask: What is one action that might help you to establish a healthier pattern of relating to this person?

- Invite people to pray for themselves. Ask them to pray in silence for the wisdom and courage to respond to others in ways that honor their lives and God’s ever-present call.

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