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Ephesians 1:17-19, 2:19-22, 3:16-19
Pew to Pulpit - How can we be better Christians in our relationships?

May 14th, 2023
Washington, D.C.
Genesis 50:15-21

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Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, 'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

Ephesians 1:17-19, 2:19-22, 3:16-19

I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may perceive what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone; in him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.

I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Tolstoy in the opening lines of *Anna Karenina* wrote, “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” You can be an unhappy family in so many major and minor ways. To celebrate Mother’s Day, I thought we would talk today about dysfunctional families! In our Pew to Pulpit submission box, we received lots of questions about relationships. Last week, we tackled a seven-year old’s question ‘Can we be happy all the time?’ This week the authors of the relationship questions span the generations with one of our questions coming from a nonagenarian! Besides that, 92-year-old, most of the people who submitted a question about relationships chose to remain anonymous. The questions sounded like this: *What does it mean to be our siblings’ keepers? How do we go about honoring our fathers and mothers, especially when the relationships are difficult? How does one begin repairing broken relationships with believers or unbelievers? How can we be better Christians in our relationships? As spouses, parents, sons/daughters, and siblings?*

These questions are great, and hard, and complicated. None of them could fully be answered in one sermon. One thing to acknowledge at the outset is that there is pain involved in the questions. Pain from relationships not being what people hope, pain from relationships where there is hurt or estrangement, pain from watching people suffer, pain from just not knowing the best ways to be together. And so we accept these questions with great compassion for those who ask because we can ALL relate to at least one of these questions. For 13 years, I have been entrusted with some of your pastoral questions about how to deal with troubled kids, how to care for spouses who are declining, how to forgive to adult siblings yet again, how to come back from marriage mistakes, how to keep the peace with in-laws, how to watch your children parent in ways that you don’t agree with, how to get through the days and the weeks and the months with our families. If the Bible is any comfort on the complicated matter of relationships, it is in somehow blessing the mess by showing us that relationships have always been hard and complicated and beautiful and important. That is why I went back to a Genesis text to peer into the mess of a very early family.

The story of the famous biblical family of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph and his brothers is powerful because it normalizes family drama. Maybe we do not need to call it a dysfunctional family, we just need to say it is a family. There is a New Yorker cartoon with a man and a woman on a date at a restaurant. They are sitting at a table staring into each other’s eyes. The caption says, “Before this goes any further, I should let you know that I have parents.” Scripture reveals that we all exist along a spectrum of behaviors that are inherent to being human and therefore inherent to being family. The shenanigans that go on in Genesis are not all that different from what takes place today. Sibling rivalry, child favoritism, children deceiving parents, husbands and wives triangulating the children, relatives out to get each other, grandparents meddling, and on and on. Yup, we’ve seen this show before!

The story we read is the very end of the Joseph story, where everything seems to be coming up roses. Read Genesis starting at Chapter 37 all the way to the end of the book, chapter 50 if you want to know the whole complicated story. Also, read it to know our collective family history. The super short version of this story is that Jacob favored his son Joseph and so Joseph’s older brothers hated him. To get rid of Joseph they sold him to a passing caravan for 20 pieces of silver, but they told their father he had been killed by a wild animal. Years later, Joseph used his ability to interpret dreams to rise to power in the household of Pharaoh. He predicted a famine and ensured Pharaoh reserved enough food for the whole kingdom. Joseph’s brother came to Pharaoh

to ask for food and Joseph recognized them. He used his position to save his family. The story is not that simple or linear, but it gets you caught up to the passage today when the family is finally saying it is sorry and reconciling. The beloved father Jacob is dead, and the children need each other in new ways. The skeptic in me says this story of reconciliation is not the end of the family drama. I always feel bad for Joseph in this story but then I remember what it is like to have little brothers. They can be so annoying. It is hard to be sibling. It is hard to be a child. It is hard to be a parent. It is hard to be an in-law. It is hard to be in a family.

A friend of mine wrote this about his family. “Living with my older brother during our teenage years was brutal. He was always fighting with my parents, always resisting instructions, never doing what they wanted him to do, never meeting their expectations. I became the golden child. A pleaser. While I loved my brother, it was impossible for us to co-exist as friends in that family system. I remember when he went away to college and I couldn’t wait to be friends again, on our own terms. That said, there has never been, for us, a happily-ever after moment, a once-and-for-all reconciliation. Any relationship we continue to have has to be worked on, negotiated – and we often find ourselves reverting into old roles and having the same fights year after year.”

Okay, so what? Families are hard but what does that mean for our lives as Christians. How do we theologically think about the relationships we have inherited and make the most out of them? That was at the heart of the questions we received.

First, it is good to recognize that God has given us the structure of family. We were placed in families and in tribes from the beginning of the Biblical narrative. God intended us to be in community together. Paul’s language to the church in Ephesus’s says, “So then, you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God.” Somehow because we belong to God, we also belong to each other, as sisters and brothers.

The Bible, time and time again, illustrates the complexities of our human relationships. We know God intends us to be in community but also that it will not always be some Leave it to Beaver version of a family. Family is the hardest kind of relationship to sustain. It is also a relationship from which we can never fully escape.

So how can we be better Christians in our relationships? A few things come to mind:

- 1) Maybe the most obvious, in your family you must act like a Christian. Loving, forgiving, sharing, comforting, and being present. Your faith should shape how you behave with your family. And if you are confused at how to behave look to Jesus. W.W.J.D. – what would Jesus do? is still a useful gut check. Would Jesus say something hurtful and snarky to a sister about her choice of people to date? Probably not. Would Jesus find a supportive way to tell his kid that he was worried about his drinking? Probably yes. Jesus works from a foundation of love and so should we.
- 2) In families, we need to be both sacrificial and self-protective. Because the relationships are just so complex, we need boundaries to keep ourselves intact. Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” That might also be a way to in check when

thing seems to be going adrift and you wonder if the relationships are healthy...Does this feel like abundant life? Jesus did not come so people would be abused, disrespected, taken advantage of, or controlled. Relationships are hard but not destructive.

- 3) 'Detach with love' is a therapeutic way of saying, after effort and consideration and even with great hopes for the future, sometimes creating space or walking away is the best thing to do. This creates boundaries for yourself where abundant life might be possible.
- 4) The last one, if you want to be better in your relationships, you need to go to church. You need a place to confess when you messed up, you need a place to talk to God about the family drama, you need a place where you can remember you are part of God's family and that there is something universally beautiful about belonging. Church is a family, and we model how to care for each other, how to pray for each other, how to reconcile with each other, and how to be in community with each other. We are called to practice it in here and go out and live into it out there.

God gave us families. For better, or worse, richer, or poorer, in sickness, and in health until death us do part. We were called to be together and maybe in the joy and in the struggle, we experience something of the power of God's love for us - a love which will not let us go.

We conclude with Paul's words, "I pray that, you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love."

Be grounded in love. Allow Jesus to dwell in your heart. And you rest in the knowledge that you are part of God's family, until death us do part and beyond. Blessings to you and those you try so hard to love, this day and always.

Amen.