

Family Reunion

Sterling UMC
August 14, 2011
Genesis 45:1-15

At the annual family-reunion picnic, a young bride led her husband over to an old woman busily crocheting in a rocker. "Granny," she said, touching the old woman's hand affectionately, "this is my new husband." The woman eyed him critically for a long moment, then asked abruptly, "Do you desire children?" Startled by her bluntness, the young man blushed and stammered, "Well-uh-yes, I do very much."

"Well," she said, looking scornfully at the large tribe gathered around the six picnic tables, "try to control it!"

Families are funny things, and I don't mean funny in the sense of humorous. Families are a strange and wonderful and dangerous thing. The people that we love the deepest are probably part of our family. In a family unit there is the potential for the most fulfilling and closest relationships that are possible here on earth. But with that closeness there is an inherent danger. If trust is broken or if some bitterness arises, those relationships that have the greatest potential for love also have the potential to inflict the deepest wounds. Nobody can hurt you like a member of your family. Because you entrust them with a part of your heart, you are most vulnerable to pain from those who are closest to you. I think that might have been why comedian George Burns said, "Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city."

Relationships are the graduate school of Christianity. You can have all sorts of good knowledge of theology and the Bible, but if you have lousy relationships, you are nothing. Relationships are where the rubber hits the road. That is why we periodically need to be reminded of the basics.

And the story of the family reunion between Joseph and his brothers gives us the perfect backdrop to do just that.

What I want you to do is to think of the two most important relationships you have, and write them down. Now think of the two most challenging or frustrating or broken down relationships you have, and write them down. Now if the same people are on both lists, you have problems.

I want to look at a few points as we think of these four key relationships.

POINT ONE: YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THESE PEOPLE DIRECTLY AFFECTS YOUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD.

It's impossible to relate well to God when we have poor relationships with those in our lives. We lose the ability to have an unencumbered relationship with God when there's a breakdown in love. We like to think that we can have a breakdown in a human relationship and go on and relate to God like nothing happened. The Bible says you can't do that.

James 3:9-10, "With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be."

1 John 4:20, "If anyone says, "I love God," yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For

anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.”

Our relationship with each other and our relationship with God have this linkage.

Bitterness and hostility will contaminate the soul, cutting us off from God, from other people, and from the church. Please don't let that happen to you.

I'm thinking of a couple that became upset with their church in the early 1970s because of a decision the church made. This couple had loved their church and its people. They had poured their heart and soul into a particular program, and the church decided that this program should be cancelled. Well, this couple took the cancellation personally. "We have loved this church and done so much for it and look what they have done to us. They have betrayed us." The couple became sick with bitterness and hostility. It was all they could talk about. At every meal, they fussed about the church. Each evening in the den, they harshly criticized the church and its leaders. They wrote angry, hot letters, complaining about the church. They looked constantly for materials to use against the church. And they made abusive speeches blasting the church.

This went on for five years, and their children looked on and listened and took it all in. Finally, their hostility spent, the couple decided to go back to the church. But they ran into something they hadn't counted on. Their children didn't want to have anything to do with the church now. Strangely enough, that couple couldn't understand that. For five years, they had bitterly denounced the church and its people in front of their children because of one decision the church's board had made, and inadvertently they had taught their children to hate the church and its people.

Five years of bitterness. Five years of hostility. Five years of ill will. How do you undo that? How do you correct it? Is it too late? These people loved only when they felt loved. But Jesus shows us a different way; Love your neighbor as yourself. One thing is sure: Life is too short for bitterness and hostility! It is so dangerous and so harmful. It is a waste of time and energy and sometimes a waste of young lives.

It's really hard to worship God properly when all you can see on the screen of your imagination is the mug shot of somebody you're really mad at. Try to fix that relationship before it breaks down your relationship with the Father, before it affects the family system.

Some of you are wondering why your relationship with God isn't doing that well. Think of the two on the list that are the most challenging. That could be the reason why.

POINT TWO: HOW YOU HANDLE DIFFICULT RELATIONSHIPS DETERMINES YOUR EMOTIONAL AND ULTIMATELY YOUR PHYSICAL HEALTH.

I am thinking of a man in another state who is a great singer. He has an outstanding tenor voice, but he has not sung in church for many years. Twenty-three years ago, he was active in his church's music program, sang in the choir, and was the church's main soloist. But then he went to a convention in New York, and there he discovered that some of the large churches in New York City pay their choir members. So when he returned home, he gave his church an ultimatum: "Pay me or I quit the choir!"

The church declined his offer, and he quit. The choir suffered his loss for a while, but soon enough, others came along to take his place. You see, none of us is indispensable. The church rolls on.

That man has sulked for twenty-three years. He doesn't come to church much any more, and when he does come, he sits in the congregation with bitterness written all over his face. He is mad most of the time. He's as full of venom now over events that happened decades ago as he ever was, and it's killing him. The bitterness not only has affected his emotional health, but it has taken its toll on the body.

Here is a man who only wanted to give if he received something in return. Therefore he wasted his talent and has wasted twenty-three years. Think of what he has missed while making himself miserable through pettiness!

If you rupture your Achilles' tendon, you can go several days or even weeks before you have surgery. Nothings bleeding, the complications aren't severe. Contrast that to a ruptured appendix. If you rupture your appendix, you better get to a hospital fast. Forget what other things you have to do. Toxins are going to spread through your body, and it could be lights out permanently if you don't deal with it immediately. A ruptured relationship is like a ruptured appendix. Once the rupture occurs, poisons are released immediately, and before you know it resentment sets in.

When we find ourselves in difficult relationships, when a rupture takes place, time is of the essence; don't let it go.

Ephesians 4:26, "Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold." Don't let the toxins take effect. If you let a grudge settle overnight, the Scripture says you're in danger of giving Satan a foothold, a little room to maneuver in your soul, and your witness to the world could be destroyed, your relationship to God endangered, and your health compromised.

The kiss of death in our relationships is what the Scriptures call hardness of heart. He says, try to reconcile the relationship. Paul doesn't say, go out and spew all your hurt on somebody, or point a finger of shame on somebody. He doesn't say push all the issues under the carpet and smile a false spiritual smile. He says go and try to reconcile that relationship.

POINT THREE: IT'S NOT HOW WE TREAT THE 99, IT'S HOW WE TREAT THE ONE.

Of course I'm referring to the story Jesus told about the shepherd and the 99 sheep. One of the points I would make is, it's very important how the shepherd reacts to the one sheep, because each of the 99 sheep could have been that sheep. You can be a great success in 99 of your relationships, but what about that number 100? We all know people that are just plain hard to love. How do we deal with these people?

Jesus gives us the answer. In Luke 6, Jesus asks, "What good does it do to love only those who love us? What credit is it for us to do good only to those who do good to us? What do we gain by lending to someone only to expect to be repaid in full?" If we do these things we are no different than anyone else. For as Jesus says, "Even sinners do these things." He calls us to a higher plain. Jesus says, "Love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back." He wants us to spend our days imitating the gracious, loving, merciful, healing Spirit of God. Life is too short for littleness and self-pity; life is too short for hate and grudges and quarreling; life is too short for resentment and jealousies; life is too short for anything less than love.

It's not what we do with the 99 that is the test, it's what we do with the one.

Jesus said in Matthew 25, "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you

since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.'

What we do to the least, we're actually doing to God. When we refuse the least, we're really refusing Jesus.

I asked you at the beginning of the message to think of two people that are the most important to you and two people who are the most challenging to you. Your relationships with them are so important that they will determine your obedience to the second greatest command in the Bible. And the quality of these relationships will determine the quality of your relationship with the Father, and your emotional and ultimately your physical health. And how you treat the most unlovable people, the one out of the hundred, is how you treat our Savior.

Now, be honest for a moment. Are you letting some miserable misunderstanding keep you constantly tense and spiritually drained? Are you feeling some jealousy or resentment? Are you keeping some quarrel alive? Are you holding a grudge? Do you need to say "I'm sorry" or "Forgive me," or "I love you"? If so, then now is the time to swallow your pride and set it right! Now is the time to do something about it! Don't let the sun go down tonight before you have fixed it. Tomorrow may be too late.

Life is too short for ill will. "Ill will" - that's a phrase that means a lot of things and covers a multitude of sins. Jealousy, envy, resentment, grudge bearing, vengeance, stubborn pride, haughtiness, spite, hatred, all these are what we mean by ill will, and nothing is more spiritually draining. Ill will is a fitting name for them, because they are all sick!

Christ came to bring wholeness, to make us well, to heal us, to deliver us from all these sins of ill will, to show us a more excellent way. The way of love. Isn't that what conversion is? Christ coming into our lives and changing our ill will to goodwill! Melting our hatred and turning it into love!

You see, we have only so much energy, and broadly speaking, it can be used in one of two ways: for good or ill to build up or tear down; to do the things of love or the things of hate.

Interestingly, both goodwill and ill will, both love and hate, are like boomerangs. Whichever you send out will come back. If you give love, it comes back to bless you. If you give hate, it comes back to haunt you.

Which way will you choose?