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Fall 2024
Navigating Family Conflict

Sermon Title Possibilities: Dealing With Unchecked Animosity

To be used with Session 5: Joseph and His Brothers: Family Jealousy

Scripture: Acts 7:54-60

Connection with Unit Theme: To complement the Bible study “Joseph and His Brothers: Family Jealousy,” this sermon builds upon today’s Bible study by connecting the unchecked animosity Joseph’s brothers had towards him to a New Testament example of how to respond to animosity.

Introduction: Let’s start today’s message with a question. What is something that we felt anxiety towards, but after it was over, we realized it was not as bad as we thought? It may have been the first day of school or the first day on a new job. It may have been when we bought our first house or when we asked someone out for a first date. Yes, the anxiety was real, but we were able to navigate it well. Today’s message is one in which we see how Stephen dealt with unchecked animosity. He did not allow the anxiety of the moment hinder him from being true to his Christ-centered values and thereby responding in a Christ honoring manner.

1. Understanding Animosity

- a. **One’s beliefs can cause animosity (Acts 7:54).** We must once again understand the context of this passage to correctly handle the text. Stephen was a man described as being “full of faith and the Holy Spirit” (Acts 6:5). He was chosen by the disciples to serve widows who were in need. Stephen was accused of blasphemy in that he proclaimed salvation is found in the risen Lord and Savior, Christ Jesus.

As we turn to our text, we see that the response from those who heard Stephen’s message is that they were “enraged and gnashed their teeth at him.” Being enraged is an internal feeling of great anger and animosity. It is not a feeling of disgust in which our favorite team lost the big game, or the dessert didn’t turn out right. Instead, it is uncontrollable anger and has cascaded over into one’s actions. The rage felt by the audience of the message had them gnashing their teeth at Stephen. To gnash one’s teeth at another meant to express judgement towards and upon someone else. In this situation, the religious elite were pronouncing judgement upon Stephen and his beliefs of Jesus.

- b. **Animosity can become violent (Acts 7:57-58).** If animosity was simply someone expressing his or her disdain for our beliefs, then we could thank them for letting us know of their disapproval and move on. But, as we learned in our group study this

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morning, Joseph's brothers expressed their animosity towards him by ultimately selling him into slavery. We also see the animosity expressed towards Stephen quickly became violent. The crowd raised their voices, rushed him, and began to stone him. We can see from the text the escalation was bad. They started by expressing their displeasure by gnashing their teeth, which turned towards raised voices and the violent actions of rushing and throwing stones. This is yet another example of what can happen when someone is unable to control raging anger.

While this can be a difficult text to grasp, we may be able to find some encouragement in that Jesus provided a warning that this type of behavior would occur. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "You are blessed *when* they insult you and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of me" (Matt. 5:11 *emphasis added*). Neither Stephen, nor us, should be surprised if we encounter animosity and jealousy when we take a stand for what we know to be true as outlined in Scripture.

2. Responding to Animosity

- a. **We are to trust God completely (Acts 7:59).** It can be easier to trust God when things are going well and a little more difficult when things are not going well. Things were not going well for Stephen in that he had people throwing stones at him. Yet, he called out, "Lord, Jesus . . .". The word Lord means boss, or the one in charge. Those throwing stones at Stephen thought they were in charge, but Stephen knew differently. He also prayed, "receive my spirit." Stephen also knew that this earth was not his home and that he was soon to be in the presence of Almighty God. This is what it looks like to trust God beyond one's immediate circumstances.
- b. **We are to respond like Christ (Acts 7:60).** We used to ask ourselves the question "What Would Jesus Do?" While this is a good question, we are unable to answer it if we do not know what He did. So, the better questions are, first, what did Jesus do, and second, am I doing those things? We ask these questions at this point in the sermon because we can see what Jesus did when in a similar circumstance. He prayed, "Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing" when He was being crucified for the sins of the world (Luke 23:34). We do not see evidence of Stephen being belligerent towards those causing him harm or calling down fire from heaven towards his accusers. Instead, he followed Jesus's example.

Conclusion: As we started our time together this morning, we remembered the anxiety associated with the first day of school or the first day of a new job. Yes, we were anxious, but we survived. When we think about animosity, we may grow anxious and that is normal. But we can learn from Stephen in that he trusted God more than his circumstances at the moment. He also more than "survive" in that he entered into the presence of Almighty God as a direct result of the animosity being expressed against him.

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