

November 3rd: Family Dysfunction

Welcome, my friends, to “Soulcare: Help For Heavy Times”. This is our new series, and over the next year we’ll be shifting into a different style of sermons and a different kind of topic. In the past, we’ve followed a lectionary—or a predetermined set of texts that take us through the Old and New Testaments—but this time, we’ll be creating our own path through the scriptures. We’ll still be looking at passages from all parts of our Bible, but we’ll be doing it with a new intention, and that intention revolves around our desire to see this congregation continue to grow as a healthy, life-giving, safe, and compassionate community.

To that end, we will be discussing a wide range of topics related to mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing. In the month of November, our mini series is called “Family Matters,” so we’ll be getting up close and personal with some dynamics that might be playing out with your loved ones, or experiences that you’ve navigated. We hope that despite these heavy topics, we will find ways to support each other and find hope. If that sounds good to you, I’m so glad you joined us today. Let’s start our time together with a quick prayer.

Gentle Parent, our scripture tells us that you are like a loving father and a protective mother to us—we belong to you and you care for us. But sadly our human families encounter all kinds of difficulties, and our relationships with our loved ones can be fraught with conflict and pain. In this time of reflection and connection, gather us into your supportive embrace so that we might grow in our understanding about ourselves, and move into healthier ways of being. Remind us of your enduring love for us, and bring comfort to our souls. Amen.

The writer Leo Tolstoy begins his novel Anna Karenina with this famous quote: “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”

I think some of us might believe that God's people have always been one big happy family, but as we heard in our scripture passage for today, that is definitely not the case. In fact, our Bible is full of different kinds of unhappy families and unhealthy family dynamics, including some very dysfunctional interactions and patterns that had a direct impact on our common spiritual story. And unfortunately, these dysfunctions and brokenness are not limited to our collective past—in fact, they might be having an effect on our families today—and it's important that we pay attention to the ways that these relationships might be doing damage to our souls and overall well being.

First, you might be asking, what is family dysfunction? What characterizes an unhealthy or unhappy family? Well, experts say that a dysfunctional family is one where conflict, instability, and chaotic interactions are common, and the emotional, mental, or physical needs of family members are either unmet or ignored.

Some frequently seen dysfunctions or underlying issues include things like: poor communication, physical or emotional neglect, a lack of support, controlling personalities, unresolved trauma, feelings like jealousy or envy, violence, and a tendency towards playing favorites. But more subtle patterns can be impactful too, behaviors like a lack of boundaries, unpredictable reactions, or unrealistic expectations can all feed into an unhealthy situation and create long term consequences. And that's because dysfunction isn't just a singular event, it's often something that families experience over and over again. It can be multilayered and multifaceted, so that in the span of years or decades, the effect compounds.

With that definition in mind, let's take a closer look at our passage for today, and see what we can learn from these biblical ancestors and apply to our lives today.

Beginning in verse 19, we learn more about the early genealogy of God's people, starting with a man named Abraham, who became a great patriarch. In this record, we find out that Abraham has two sons, and his favored son Isaac

goes on to marry and have two sons of his own: Jacob and Esau. But the events surrounding the birth of Jacob and Esau are complicated. When Isaac's wife Rebekah is pregnant, she begins to notice that the babies in her womb seem to be constantly moving—jostling against each other. When she asks God why this is happening to her, God responds with his prophecy about her babies: “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger.” During the birth, the younger of the two sons comes out grasping his brother's heel, and so they literally name him Jacob, which means either “he grasps the heel” or “he deceives.”

Between this, and the earlier prophecy regarding Jacob's future power over his younger brother, you can see how there might be some tension in their future. Verses 27 and 28 spell this out for us, saying, “the boys grew up, and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, while Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents. Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob.” At the end of this chapter, we see a foreshadowing of what is to come—Esau comes in from the fields and is exhausted and starving, and Jacob uses this opportunity to manipulate his brother. In order to receive the stew that has been prepared, Jacob forces Esau into a promise to sell the birthright, meaning that Esau promises to give his younger brother the inheritance that is due to him from their father.

In Genesis 27, the conflict reaches a climax. We hear that Isaac is now at the end of his life, and he is ready to give his final blessing to his oldest son and transfer the birthright to him. When Isaac gives Esau instructions to go out and hunt for Isaac's final meal, Rebekah overhears and decides to assist her younger son in an act of deception, partially because Jacob is her favorite child, and partially because she despises Esau's wives. Starting in verse 15, we hear the depth of Rebekah's betrayal, our text says, “Then Rebekah took the best clothes of Esau, her older son, which she had in the house, and put them on her younger son Jacob. She also covered his hands and the smooth part of his neck with the goatskins. Then she handed to her son Jacob the tasty food and the bread she had made.” Fooled by these clothes and Jacob's lies, Isaac blesses

his younger son with his property and possessions, leaving nothing left for Esau. At the end of this story, Jacob flees the family lands because Esau has threatened to kill him, and the two brothers do not reconcile for several decades.

So going back to the definition of a dysfunctional family—what do we see in this text? What issues are we seeing in these relationships?

Immediately a few things come to mind for me, so let me give you some examples.

First, the rivalry between Jacob and Esau is compounded by their parents' decision to play favorites and perhaps even compare them to each other. Literally from their conception, they are positioned as natural enemies, and so their family seems to treat them accordingly. Not only does this create alliances and fractures within the larger family, it doesn't allow for either Jacob or Esau to be their own, true person—they are only known and cared for in relation to their sibling and preferred parent. Second, these characters turn to manipulation and deceit in order to get their way, instead of approaching these conflicts and situations with maturity and empathy. They don't communicate with integrity, instead choosing to trick and betray each other for their own gain. They see each other as obstacles to their own desires, rather than individuals who deserve respect and love. They fall into hostile roles within the family structure, rather than working together to achieve mutual support. It's a whole cycle—because their distrust for each other feeds into their behavior, and then that behavior creates more distrust.

But why should we care about this story of family dysfunction? Why talk about this issue as part of this series?

Well, I think we see that these dynamics and unhealthy patterns weigh heavily on our biblical characters. This kind of family structure and system doesn't allow any of them to be vulnerable or honest with each other, there's no sense of safety here. There's no loyalty, or encouragement, or genuine enjoyment of

each other. There's no emotional closeness happening here. There's very little peace described in these chapters. And while we don't hear their internal monologues, I think we can guess that their souls are probably as chaotic and unsettled as their actions—I imagine they never feel at home or secure in their attachment to each other. Their souls are disconnected from each other, rather than brought together in harmony.

Let me ask you this: would you want to be part of this family? Are these the kind of interactions you want in your life? Would your soul be safe in these kinds of situations?

I tend to think not. I think most of us feel unsettled when we hear about this story, and rightly so. Even if this kind of dysfunction is familiar to us, or we have experienced similar patterns in our own families, I think our souls intuitively know that there has to be a better way. I think our souls know that this isn't what God intended for us, this isn't the way God would like to see his people act in relationship to each other. When we consider the overarching message of the Bible, we hear that God is love, and God created each of us for love—it has always been God's hope that our human relationships would mirror the divine love that is embedded inside of us. God crafted our souls for the kind of care and support that makes it easier to be our true and best selves, and so I believe that God desires for our families to be sources of comfort and strength rather than dysfunction or conflict.

So if that is God's intention for humanity, what does that mean for us? What does this mean for you and me?

Well, this passage might be an invitation for us to consider our own families and our own stories. This story from Genesis might be a starting place for us to think more deeply about the cycles of dysfunction that are present in our own lives, or relationship patterns that are harming our souls. If this narrative of conflict resonated with you, then this could be a theme for you to explore in your own Soulcare journey, either in your personal reflection time or with a trusted friend or mental health professional.

I know that unraveling some of these dynamics can feel like an insurmountable task, it can feel impossible to begin this work. It is certainly an effort that is nuanced and complex, and not without significant discomfort. But not engaging with these unhealthy patterns is not an option if we want our souls to be healthy. We must dig deeper into our past and present if we desire to build happier families and become our true selves in the future. In his book “It Didn’t Start With You: How Inherited Family Trauma Shapes Who We Are and How to End the Cycle,” author Mark Wolynn says this: “Remaining silent about family pain is rarely an effective strategy for healing it. The suffering will surface again at a later time, often expressing itself in the fears or symptoms of a later generation.”

So if healing is something you want to move towards, or something that you’re feeling called to learn more about, here’s what I dig into for today.

When it comes to our dysfunction, the truth is that we cannot fix what we cannot name. We cannot fix dynamics that we cannot identify. We cannot heal from experiences that we cannot understand. So the very first step towards healthier relationships has to be an honest evaluation of the bonds that have shaped us.

And in order to reach that honest evaluation, you might need to ask yourself: is there dysfunction in my family that I’m not seeing or not acknowledging? If it feels difficult to be objective, imagine breaking down the dynamics between your loved ones just like we did with Isaac, Rebekah, and their two sons.

You might question: is my family communicating poorly, or neglecting the needs of one of its members? Is there someone in my family who is using manipulation or deception to get what they want or hurt others? Is there a relative who pits people against each other or plays favorites? Is there someone that is being passive aggressive or lashing out because of their own painful experiences? Is there disrespect that has been tolerated but should have been called out? Is there emotional distance that has widened into estrangement?

You might also want to ask yourself if there are ways that you are knowingly or unknowingly contributing to the dysfunction—even if you have good intentions. Have you told others not to “rock the boat,” when a relative did something that was wrong or inappropriate? Have you appeased someone who was causing tension, even if that created anxiety inside of you? Have you let anger or resentment simmer underneath the surface of a relationship without communicating those feelings or without knowing how to speak up?

I know those are not easy things to reflect on, and I don’t ask these questions to shame any of us, but to help us own the roles that we play in our family systems, whether we are a parent, spouse, adult child, or other relative. When we understand how we have engaged with other family members, we might be able to see if we are stuck in some alliances or fractures that are keeping us from the harmony and happiness that we are longing for. We might be able to fully articulate if certain dynamics have pushed us into a role that we no longer desire to fill.

And with that knowledge, we can then make a decision about how to move forward. Because you do have a choice. You may not have been able to choose which family you are born into, but you can choose what relationships you cultivate or tolerate. You didn’t get to choose your parents, but you can choose what types of bonds are part of your life here and now. You get to choose, because it is your soul that is at risk if you do not.

For some of us, naming the dysfunction will help us see that some relationships might not be salvageable or safe for us at this moment in time. You might discover that a specific wound is too deep, or that a loved one isn’t ready to support us in the way you’ve asked for, or that your relative isn’t able to enter into the work of accountability and reconciliation. If that’s where your journey takes you, I hope that you will do what is necessary to protect your emotional, mental, and spiritual wellbeing.

But if there are relationships in your life that you would like to rebuild or strengthen, knowing the details of your family dynamics can empower you to have the tough conversations that might be necessary. With that knowledge, you can determine what it will take to move towards reconciliation. You can set boundaries with your time, energy, and personal information. You might discover that learning about your family's dysfunction and fixing it together is an act that brings you even deeper into relationship—because now that relationship is grounded in vulnerability and mutual support. You might discover that being honest with each other about your wounds can be a catalyst for more trustworthy, more compassionate, and more enduring bonds that will be safe places for our souls to thrive.

It won't happen overnight, but with time and intentionality, each of us has the potential for transformation. Each of us, and each of our relatives are capable of moving towards greater mental, emotional, and spiritual health. Even if dysfunction is part of your past, it doesn't have to be part of your future.

My friends, you get to choose. Amen.