

5-10-15

“If Mama Ain’t Happy, Nobody’s Happy” by Rev. Judy Bagley-Bonner

In our scripture from Luke today, Jesus says “Jerusalem, Jerusalem... How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing. And see, your house is left desolate to you!” It struck me that this is a perfect text for Mother’s Day, because it depicts God as a nurturing mama bird, attempting to snuggle her children to her, in order to protect the health of her family’s life. Yet the chicks resist their mother’s wisdom, and their home is left desolate as a result. How about your house, or maybe you live alone now, and can think of it in terms of wider, extended family. In whatever configuration your family may now find itself, does your family life ever feel desolate? Well, if it does, first of all know you are not alone. Even the healthiest and most high functioning families, (I understand there may be a few of them out there) have times when things feel desolate. And most families have plenty of difficult dynamics, so first and foremost, know you are not alone. And certainly if you get beyond the level of literal families, out to a wider definition of, say, church families or maybe the family that is your housing association or work place, all the way up to the universal, human family, at every level, there are issues. Someone once said “wherever two or more are gathered, there are politics.” Yep. Sounds about right. Ever since it was just Adam, Eve, Cain and Able, there have been complicated, dysfunctional family dynamics.

So this week and next, I’d like to take look at some of the principles for creating healthy family life, whether that be our literal families, our church family, or the human family. We need to be intentional about the ways we communicate and how we deal with one another in order to protect the emotional and spiritual health of our various types of families. We do so as people of faith not to appease a stern or punitive God, but because our loving, nurturing mama bird knows what will ultimately make us happy, and wants that for us!

So I’m going to approach this from two directions. This week, I’d like to look at some of the negative things that we need to learn to do differently in relationships; things that when they become habitual, lead to a baseline climate that can indeed tend to be desolate, to drag us down rather than lift us up. Then next week, we will flip the focus to the positive: those practices that when they become habitual can help lead to an overall climate that is warm, nurturing and caring, that can help raise us all up to be the best versions of ourselves, which I believe is what God desires for us.

So first of all, one of the main ways I believe that we contribute to desolation in our families and other communities comes under the overall heading of what I will call “dirty pool fighting.” Now conflict in relationships is inevitable, and is, in and of itself, neither good nor bad. Its how we handle it, what we do with it that makes it lead to desolation or creative healing. I believe this is why there is that extensive passage in scripture about how to handle conflict in the church. It says, if a member of the church offends you, go directly to that person and talk about it. If that doesn’t work, take one other church member with you, and so forth, outlining a specific practice to be used in conflict. My own take on this is not that we necessarily have to follow the minutia of that specific practice, but that we have a process, tailored to our own communities, which we follow, as opposed to just handling it according to our own instincts. Because our instincts, natural and human as they are, often lead us astray. In this church family, by the way, the specific process for handling conflict is, depending on the situation, either to work it out directly between the parties involved, and/or to go to the Pastoral Relations Committee.) All churches, and I believe all families need to have some version of a general process for handling conflict.

In literal families, it might be similar to what I've just outlined, which is to go directly, only to the other involved, and attempt to talk it out respectfully, and failing that to make a back up plan, maybe going together to a trusted other, maybe a counselor or pastor, who can help the parties themselves talk it out.

The key here is to talk it out directly and respectfully, not to resort to what too often comes naturally to us, which is the dirty pool stuff. We play dirty in relationships in all kinds of ways. Rather than going directly, we sometimes fall prey to the natural temptation to go sideways to others, and seek support for our own position, and pretty soon there are sides and alliances and its something that easily could have been handled simply and without the drama that always ensues when communication goes sideways rather than directly. Or instead of owning our own opinions and positions, we try to express them indirectly, maybe by sarcasm or teasing. Then we can say what we want but not have to take responsibility for it because we can fall back on "I was only teasing. Can't you take a joke?" Or we fail to take responsibility for our own opinion by implying that unnamed others share it. This is the oldest trick in the book in church families, when someone goes to the pastor or board and says "I speak for others who prefer to remain nameless." I'm sorry, but in healthy families, people speak only for themselves and never anonymously. Otherwise, there is no simple, clean way to respond, and everything becomes convoluted and messy.

Well, there are other ways that we fail to play fair as well. How about "the silent treatment" when somebody hangs onto a grudge and simply stalks talking to the other person. That's better than rage, I guess, but the goal is to work it all the way to resolution, to restored, healthy relationship, and that can't happen if one of the people in the conflict just goes silent.

Finally, it seems to me that in healthy families, there is a broad based, shared commitment to protecting the overall emotional and spiritual climate, to assertively resisting it when any of the unhelpful stuff starts; to protecting climates that remain free of bickering or sarcasm (which is literally defined as "tearing flesh" by the way) or working up drama or holding onto grudges which need to be forgiven quickly seventy times seven times!

Does your home and family seek to handle conflict in clean and healthy ways, or maybe you've just never learned how to do that? If you would like to, there are lots of things that can help. Good books and videos, or professionals who can help. This church is in the fortuitous position of having a retired marriage and family therapist in our ranks, who is willing to work with people at no charge, to learn new and healthier ways to communicate. I will say openly and honestly that Brian and I have seen counselors at times over our now thirty four years together. We always tell people in pre-marital counseling that families have a doctor and a dentist and a mechanic. They would do well to have a counselor at the ready, too. Or at least be willing to get one, and hopefully early, before the issues get too big.

And as to our church family, let me say this. Perhaps the first thing that struck me when I first came here was the palpable sense of loving care that exists in this church family. We need to understand that this kind of emotional climate, this strong sense of love as baseline, does not necessarily exist in all churches. It is a gift and it is, in my opinion, the very most important thing that can exist for a church. If it is there, and it is here, it needs to be protected with its life. Members need to care for and steward a healthy, loving church climate like they do one another individually. It is a "thing" in its own right and needs the same tending as each of us does. And I will say now that if and when we see ourselves or one another falling prey to that understandable temptation to be indirect in any of these ways on occasion, (we all do it from time to time) we need at the very least to not participate in whipping things up. And we might

gently, on occasion, remind one another that the PRC is the place to deal with conflict. Doing this will protect the very best thing we have going here: that strong, healing force for love that you can feel the minute you walk in.

I would like to close with a short piece written by the senior minister I used to work with., and tweaked by me. It is a covenant for family life. It names some of the things I have talked about today, and adds some others. Brian and I have found it very helpful in our family and in our church families over the years, and it offer it to you now as a mothers day gift.

Covenant For Family Life

1. We will ground our family in the depth and love of God. We will seek to create a “baseline climate” of warmth and nurture in our home that honors God and each other as created in God’s image and likeness.
2. We will care for each other and pray for each other and enact in our home the love that we seek for the wider world.
3. We will be honest with each other and be willing to work through our disagreements, not pretending that all is well to protect a false peace or because we don’t want to expend energy.
4. When something comes between us, we will convey this directly to the one(s) concerned instead of talking about the matter to others. When there are conflicts, we will communicate these honestly, openly, respectfully and in reference to specific incidents. We will talk only about particular behaviors and not make broad generalizations. If we are unable to resolve the conflict ourselves, we will seek appropriate, outside help.
5. We will give each other respect, care, and loyalty. We will not criticize each other in front of others. While our interactions may sometimes be playful, we will not use teasing as a way to hurt each other.
6. We will take time to be together and enjoy each other apart from routine activities. We will nurture our family life together, and remember that we are more than just roommates.
7. We will seek to avoid the temptation to take each other for granted, and will seek to use with each other the same kind of manners we would use with friends and acquaintances.
8. We will seek to avoid the habit of domestic bickering, and will consciously choose the emotional climate we wish to set and maintain in our home.
9. We will forgive each other and ourselves when we fail in these efforts, and will grant each other and ourselves unlimited chances to begin again.

I believe that healthy families at all levels make God happy, precisely because God knows they make us happy! So let that Mama Bird pull you under her wing in the warm embrace of love. From there, its easier to forgive and accept forgiveness, to love and be loved, which is our only real calling. Happy Mothers Day.