

Sermon Title: “David—And His Family—in Crisis”
Psalm 130, II Samuel 18
Salem United Methodist Church; June 28, 2020
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Today’s story in 2nd Samuel 18 is a sad one. It ends with David mourning the death of his son, Absalom. Back in chapter 13, we can read how David’s son, Amnon, raped his half-sister, David’s daughter, Tamar, and essentially left her on the trash heap. What did David do to punish Amnon? Absolutely nothing. Which is absolutely appalling. Absalom was David’s son and the full brother of Tamar. After the rape, Absalom opened his home to his wounded sister, Tamar. Absalom waited a couple of years, then, when the time was right, Absalom ordered a mob-style hit on his half-brother Amnon.

King David was furious. Absalom hid out for 3 years until his father calmed down, then, with some help, was able to more or less reconcile with his father. However, David still never acknowledged the wrong that was done to Tamar. She is never mentioned again in the story.

It’s likely that Absalom still held a grudge against his father. This would explain why Absalom eventually formed his own army and attempted to overthrow his father by force. David had his soldiers fight back, with the proviso that they not harm his son, Absalom. Unfortunately, David’s soldiers did not obey, and they killed Absalom in cold blood while he hung from his hair in a tree. Here is where we find David weeping, “Absalom, Absalom, my son!”

What a mess! You can’t make this stuff up. What a crisis – for David and his family! Not to that degree, but it reminds me of many families I have known during my time in the pastorate and now in counseling. Parents make poor decisions that harm their children or set them against one another. Children, sometimes from loving families, make poor decisions that cause their parents and their communities grief. Alcoholism and addiction complicate everything. Relationships become toxic. To try to save themselves, people back away or leave their families completely.

Lest we think we’re safe, I believe all families have some degree of dysfunction. As long as imperfect human beings belong to families, we all face dysfunction. Were it not for the grace of God, showing us how to forgive and love each other even when we do not deserve it, we could all be in far worse condition. David’s family is a classic, if not extreme, example of a dysfunctional family. You might say that David’s family puts the “func” in dysfunctional. I mean, don’t they seem crazy? Sorry, I just broke my own rules. Crazy is a bad word in the mental health field. Mental health providers are not supposed to say crazy. Crazy

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doesn't exist in our DSM, the diagnostic manual that nearly all mental health providers use. Frankly, I used the word crazy to bring attention to a major barrier that keeps people from seeking out mental health services: stigma. I think stigma is the number one reason people don't come through our doors. People don't want to be thought of by others as being crazy. They don't want to think of themselves as crazy. The majority of people who come to me for counseling are dealing with anxiety or depression, in one form or another. Anxious and depressed people are definitely not crazy. Crazy is an unhelpful word, especially if it keeps needy people from seeking help.

Some people with common mental illnesses are able to handle the problems of life without needing to see a mental health provider or take medication - but certainly not everyone. The fact that my schedule is often completely full is a testament to the reality that many people know they need help and are willing to ask for it. Seeking help for anxiety, depression, or what have you should be no different than visiting a physical therapist or dermatologist. There are things we can do in therapy that often work very well: techniques to learn, thinking to change, thought diaries to keep, new behaviors to begin, and old behaviors to stop. There are difficult stories to tell, stories that can't be shared with even those closest to us, but that can be a source of healing when we finally say them out loud to someone else who cares.

So, what can YOU do if you're in a badly dysfunctional family?

Here are some suggestions:

- Set appropriate boundaries to protect yourself and others in your family. For example, if someone wastes all their money, don't keep giving them more! Be helpful, but recognize when too much helping hurts. Healthy boundaries are our friends.
- Seek help in counseling, both for yourself and, if possible, for as many family members who are willing to participate.
- Look for a licensed mental health provider, who may be a counselor, like myself, a psychologist, or a social worker. Know that counselors often specialize in certain conditions and populations. For example, I typically see individuals who are age 14 and older. I don't usually see children, families, or couples, but there are many others who do. If you're looking for assistance with your marriage and family, it is often helpful to see a counselor who is licensed and has a degree in marriage and family counseling. There are two good places to look for counselors, the list of preferred providers with your insurance company, and the website psychologytoday.com, where many of us advertise with a fuller description of our background and services.

There are helpful books to read:

- Stop Walking on Eggshells, by Paul Mason and Randi Kreger, a book about living with persons who suffer from personality disorders, particularly borderline
- How to Talk so Kids Will Listen and Listen so Kids Will Talk, by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish, a book I especially like because it contains great cartoons
- Get Out of My Life, but First Could You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall?, by Anthony Wolf. I love the title, and the book's pretty good, too.
- Feeling Good, by David Burns, a self-help guide one can use to heal from depression

What can you do if others you care about are in dysfunctional families:

- Don't judge. Families are complicated. Sometimes parents do the best they can, and their children still make poor choices. It's hard for insiders to know the whole story, let alone outsiders. All families have our battle scars and complications, some beginning generations ago.
- Listen well. Share as little as possible of your own story. Good listeners are hard to find, but so, so, needed.
- Don't give advice unless it's asked for. Trained counselors rarely give advice. It's best to listen and give people tools to help them solve their own problems.
- Don't gossip. Pray for them. However, if you want others to pray for them, share as little identifying information as possible: no names or details, unless you have permission from everyone in the family to share. Otherwise, well-meaning prayer requests can denigrate into gossip.
- Again, refer the family to a licensed mental health provider

Above all, don't give up on families. Have hope that our God wants the best for us, despite what we and others have done to mess up God's plan. As is said in Psalm 130,

Israel, trust the Lord! He is always merciful, and he has the power to save you. Israel, the Lord will save you from all of your sins.

This is our hope. Thanks be to our precious Lord! Amen.