

McCabe United Methodist Church

January 20 & 21, 2018

Puzzling Relationships Series: The Puzzle of Family

Sermon on Joshua 24:14-15 & Colossians 3:12-17

Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

Back in the early 2000's, when I was in seminary, I took an elective class on pre-marital, marital, and family counseling. One of the projects for this class was to create and reflect upon our own family *genogram*.

If you're familiar with the “family tree” concept, you have a basic, working understanding of what a *genogram* is. A family tree, of course, is a diagram of the names and relationships of your immediate and extended family – typically several generations' worth.

Like the family tree template pictured here, your family tree might start a generation up, with your parents...then, connected by a branch and up a generation, would be your grandparents and their siblings...up yet another generation would be your great-grandparents and their siblings...and so forth and so on.

A *genogram* is similar to a family tree in that, like a family tree, a genogram depicts generations in a family – whichever generations you want to depict. Here is a mostly blank, very basic genogram sample:

In this particular genogram, men in the family are the squares and women are the circles. If you look over to the key – the red box on the right side – you see a bit about how to interpret what's depicted.

The “index” person is identified with a double line...so that's the male (the square) person toward the very bottom. The “index” person simply references whose family is being depicted. (If I were to show you my genogram, there would be a double line around me.)

On a genogram, marriages are identified with a single line connecting two people. So, on this genogram sample, the index person is a man who is married to a woman, and you can see they have one daughter.

The generations of this genogram sample go *up* from the “index person”, so above him and his wife, are his parents, his grandparents, and his great-grandparents. No siblings in any generation are included here – I suspect for simplicity's sake.

A full genogram, includes not only all persons in every generation – for as many generations of your family as you want to depict – but it also includes special markings to identify other things.

If you look at the key in the red box, here, you will see some of the other things genograms can identify: these other things add complexity and honesty. For example, anyone who has died is marked with an “X” on a genogram. You can also see on this particular genogram key that conflict, cut-off, separation, and divorce all have special signifiers.

Beyond what was shown on *that* genogram key, there are many additional “attributes” that can be added. As you see here, individuals on a family genogram can be identified as having relationships with each other that are “positive”, “close”, “distant”, “close but hostile”, et cetera.

Further yet, genograms can add identifying marks for persons with substance abuse issues, psychological problems, significant physical struggles, important cultural distinctions, incarceration...the list goes on and on and on.

Basically, a genogram takes your family tree – something that usually just lists names – and adds to it *relational dynamics*...plus multiple things that nearly always have an *affect* on relational dynamics. So, what started out pretty simply, with squares and circles and single lines...*this*:

Becomes something like *this*:

Now, just so you know, “Lynn”, whose genogram this is, is a made-up person. I suspect, however, that most of us can relate to the rather complex relational dynamics depicted on her imaginary genogram.

As depicted, there are *positive* relationships between parents, children, and siblings, there are *hostile* and *distant* relationships, there are cultural dynamics at play, there is a father with a significant mental health diagnosis, there is a sibling relationship that was cutoff then repaired... there was a stillbirth, there was an adoption – and who knows what else that we *can't* see via the lines on this genogram!

As I mentioned, in my seminary marriage and family counseling class, one of our projects was to create and interpret our own family genogram. I thought about finding the genogram I created and putting it up on the screen for you...but, that genogram is over 15 years old and a *lot* has changed in my family since then!

However, were I to show you a genogram of three or four generations of my family as it exists today, you would see: marriages, divorces, children born in and out of wedlock, addictions, miscarriages, close relationships, co-dependent relationships,

distant and cut-off relationships, formerly cut-off relationships that have been repaired, interracial marriages, mental health issues, suicide, et cetera, et cetera.

And, goodness, if every person on my family genogram were given identifiers for their particular political and religious affiliations, that would add additional, *significant* layers of complexity. (In fact, many of the temporary relationship cut-offs in my family were *because* of religion or politics! My guess is some of you can relate...)

Now, let me be very clear about something crucially important: all family dynamics simply are what they are. There's no inherent *judgment* on any of it. Families are filled with human beings. God created us humans wonderfully unique *and* wonderfully complex...and the second you put human beings into relationship with each other, the complexity increases.

What genograms do well is represent the fact that families are like jigsaw puzzles. Each person represented on any given genogram is a *piece* of the family puzzle... and the unique qualities we each bring to the puzzle affect how *our* piece of the family puzzle connects to each *other* piece of the family puzzle.

Some pieces connect well to others and don't mind being closely interlocked with most other pieces of the family puzzle...while some pieces want – or *need* – to stay as far away as possible from *other* pieces of the family puzzle.

There's the grandmother everyone reveres and defers to...and there's the creepy uncle all the women steer clear of. There's the grandfather who never ceases to make people laugh...and there's the aunt who can't help but vocalize her thoughts on how all the grandkids are “way too active.”

There's the cousin who's in and out of rehab...the other cousin who can do no wrong. And, God help us if it's an election year or if that one relative has joined yet *another* new church everyone is suspicious of! They're *family*...and they all fit into the puzzle somehow, right?...even those puzzle pieces you quietly wish weren't there.

So. Our families are wonderfully complex. Most of us are fully aware of that. But what does the Bible have to say about this puzzle of family? What does *Jesus* have to say about family?

Well, what Jesus and the Bible have to say about family actually runs rather counter to what our culture tends to teach us about family.

Especially in recent years, I have seen a lot of home decor pop up with sweet little sayings about *family*...sayings like,

“Family: where life begins and love never ends” and “The love of a family is life's greatest blessing” and “Family is everything” and “Family comes first”. These are nice sentiments! They reflect well what our culture tends to teach us about family. The tricky thing is that they do *not* necessarily reflect what Scripture teaches us about family...

So, first, let me offer some words of Scripture we have not yet heard in worship today. Hear these words of Jesus from Matthew chapter 10:

“If you love your father or mother more than you love me, you are not worthy of being mine; or if you love your son or daughter more than me, you are not worthy of being mine.”

And how about these words from Matthew chapter 12:

“As Jesus was speaking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. Someone told Jesus, 'Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, and they want to speak to you.' Jesus asked, 'Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?' Then he pointed to his disciples and said, 'Look, these are my mother and brothers. Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother!’”

“Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” Powerful and challenging words, don't you think?

And what of St. Paul? In several of his letters to the early Christian churches, he offered what are known as “household rules” – instructions about how Christian families are to order and conduct themselves.

Our reading from Colossians chapter 3 is part of a section in Colossians dedicated to household rules. Hear again the words of today's Colossians reading:

“Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony...”

“And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace. And always be thankful. Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts. And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father.”

Now. Those words are not just meant for Christian *families*. They are meant for *all Christians*. Whether you are single, coupled, divorced, widowed, have children, don't have children, you name it: those are instructions for *all* who claim Jesus as Lord and Savior.

In Colossians chapter 3, Paul uses these words to lead into a section of instructions about how husbands and wives are to live with one another, how parents are to treat their children, how children are to treat their parents, and how servants are to treat their employers.

But *those* family instructions are given the foundation of *these* words: “*Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony ... And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father.*”

Whatever the puzzle of your family looks like, let the binding that keeps it together be the love of Christ...even in those moments when you wish you could be on an island alone somewhere, away from your puzzling family!

Now...remember those popular culture sayings about family?

“Family: where life begins and love never ends” and “The love of a family is life's greatest blessing” and “Family is everything” and “Family comes first”. Again, these are nice sentiments and I certainly don't mean to be critical of anyone who might have signs with such sayings gracing the walls of their home!

Yet...when we consider all those Scripture readings, for people of faith, *family* is actually *never* to come first, neither is family *everything*...and the love of family is not, actually, life's greatest blessing.

To say nothing of the quote that family is where life begins and where love never ends. Both those distinctions belong to God our heavenly creator and constant sustainer, *not* to our earthly families.

Now, I *love* my family. I love my family so much we're growing it by one this year! I *love* my family...so, it's hard for me to think about the fact that, as a follower of Jesus Christ, I'm called not to put my *family* first, but, rather, to put faithfulness to Christ and his kingdom *first*.

See, it's not that our earthly families don't matter – of course they matter.

As puzzling and frustrating and anxiety-producing and joyful and chaotic as they are, our earthly families *do* matter. But, as people of Christian faith, how we love and serve our families is only *second* to how we love and serve Jesus Christ and his

world. In fact, what if we thought of our family as the primary vehicles *through which* we love and serve Jesus Christ and his world?

Let me say that again:

What if we thought of our family as the primary vehicle *through which* we love and serve Jesus Christ and his world?

Both our *blood* family and our *chosen* family: all those different puzzle pieces, joining together, not only to create a beautiful family portrait...but, most importantly, joining together to make God's *world* more beautiful.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, we make God's world more beautiful by following Joshua's instructions, allowing our families to serve God *first*...and we make God's world more beautiful by following St. Paul's instructions in Colossians: instructions to clothe ourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience...by making allowance for each other's faults, forgiving the offenses of others as God in Christ forgives us.

And, as Paul wrote, we join together to make God's world more beautiful by clothing ourselves, always and forever, in the *love of Jesus Christ*, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

That is good news, and a holy challenge – for even the most jagged puzzle pieces among us.

Let us pray.

God of all families, fill our hearts and our homes with your presence. Keep before us the challenge of putting first service to you and your kingdom. In our work, in our rest, in our play, may we seek to serve you. And may all our families – blood family and chosen family – be bound together with your great, great love; in Jesus name we pray. Amen.