

McCabe United Methodist Church

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Puzzling Relationships Series: The Puzzle of Strained Relationships

Sermon on Ephesians 4:1-5

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When I was in college, working on my vocal music education degree, there were a couple of women in my class with whom I had rather strained relationships. Part of the problem was that all three of us were sopranos and, as you may or may not know, sopranos have a reputation for being divas.

We sopranos have the highest voices in the choir, and we usually get to sing the melody: by virtue of those things alone, for good or ill, we tend to be the most “noticeable” members in any given choir...and I suspect that's at least partly why, over time, sopranos became the divas of the vocal music world.

Though this certainly is not the case for all sopranos, we sopranos are stereotyped as being competitive, “catty”, selfish, and fiercely judgmental of other sopranos. That said, sometimes we can laugh at ourselves. Just for fun, here are a couple of my favorite jokes about sopranos:

How many sopranos does it take to change a light bulb? One. She just holds onto the bulb and the world revolves around her.

And...what's the difference between a soprano and a terrorist? Well, you can negotiate with a terrorist. (Of course, that joke is not meant to make light of actual political terrorism...but, rather, to make a point about how extremist and self-involved we sopranos can be.)

So...when I was in college, there were two other sopranos in my class with whom I had strained relationships.

One of them was someone with whom I simply never *meshed*. Not quite sure what the exact problem was, but, despite the number of classes we had together, and despite the fact that we sang right next to each other in choir for a year or two, we never became friends...nor did we even try.

(I always had a sneaking suspicion this was partly because I made it into our college's top choir when we were sophomores and *she* didn't make it into the top choir until we were juniors. But that's only a guess made from my limited perspective.)

The other of these two sopranos with whom I had a strained relationship was someone I was actually friends with. You've perhaps heard the word "frenemy" – someone who is part friend, part enemy – that was kind of the nature of our relationship.

We ate together with other friends, we would sit next to each other in classes, and we were part of a small group of girlfriends who would regularly hang out during our free time.

Yet, underneath the facade of our friendship was a competitiveness we couldn't shake.

She got *all* the solos. She seemed to be a favorite of our choir director. And, of course, *she* made it into the top choir when we were *freshmen*, while I didn't make it in until we were sophomores. (Jealousy over *that* was something of a theme among my college's singers.)

While we were in college together, these strained relationships took up a decent amount of space in my emotional and spiritual life. I worried over them with some frequency. Sometimes I did things that improved the relationships, while, other times I did things that added pain to the strain.

And, wouldn't you know it, but, after graduation, these two women both all but disappeared into the shadows of my memory.

New relationships emerged...each with its own set of joys and pitfalls. I've occasionally thought over the years, "Why did I give those strained relationships so much emotional energy? Why didn't I just decide to either intentionally work to improve them...or let them go?"

Now. I have to be honest with you all: of the three sermons I will have preached during this *Puzzling Relationships* series, *this* one – this message on the puzzle of strained relationships – has been the biggest struggle for me.

See, I like to think I can get along well with most people I encounter. I do my best to be kind and understanding when I interact with and get to know people. That said, throughout my life – as I said a bit ago – there have always been people who I just can't manage to *mesh* with.

You know how it is, right? It's someone you interact with on a fairly regular basis and, half the time you feel like you're on solid ground, while the other half you leave interactions wondering, "What was *that* about?"

You feel...kind of *off*. Unbalanced. Like you're never quite sure if you're actually on good terms with the person or not. The relationship is just kind of *strained*.

Then, of course, there are the family members and the friends and the co-workers and the people at school you don't even have to *wonder* about: you just know without a *doubt* the relationship is strained – either because something happened to cause a rift...or because it's simply clear you're not particularly simpatico.

And the choice we all have when it comes to those strained relationships in our lives...is the choice to either intentionally work to improve them or to simply let the relationship go.

Of course, we also have the option of swallowing hard, sweeping things under the rug, and simply trying to *forget* the things that cause strain in those relationships...but that can lead to bitterness and resentment – that can lead to wounds that *fester* rather than heal.

Now, when it comes to the option of letting relationships go, it's a bit tricky. Some relationships are too important for us to simply let go. In such cases, the hard work of healing is our best option...though it is extremely difficult.

If we have been hurt by the words or actions of someone close to us, it's no easy task to be vulnerable with that person – to be open and honest about how they've hurt us. Doing so takes courage and a sense of trust that the other person will receive our honesty with a measure of grace.

Of course, if *we* are the one who has hurt someone we care about, it takes a different kind of courage to listen with open ears and an open heart. We may have no idea how we have caused them pain...or, we may be fully aware we've caused pain. Either way, it's not easy to listen to someone we love tell us we've hurt them.

And, when someone we love *does* have the courage to tell us we've hurt them, so often our instinct is to defend ourselves...to stick to our guns...to make it clear why we were “right” to be hurtful...or to apologize for *their* hurt feelings, rather than to apologize for *our* hurtful behavior.

It hurts my heart, but that seems to be the way of so many apologies these days: an apology is made for the hurt feelings of others, or for the offense taken...rather than making an apology for the words or actions that *caused* the offense.

“I'm sorry you were offended,” or, “I'm sorry your feelings got hurt,” rather than, “I did not realize what I said was offensive; I'm so sorry,” or, “I am so sorry my behavior caused you pain.”

It takes one kind of courage to be honest with someone who has hurt or offended us. It takes another kind of courage to set aside our defensiveness when someone makes it clear *we* have hurt *them*.

Granted, sometimes we do things that need to be done, knowing the other person involved will likely get hurt. Breaking-up with someone who is not right for you. Saying a hard, but truthful word of concern.

The challenging reality of our human relationships is that, when other people are part of our lives, pain will sometimes be mixed-in with the joy. We cannot get around the puzzling nature of our human relationships.

As it is, sometimes it feels like we're trying to relate to another puzzle piece...and we just can't figure out how to make our pieces "fit" together.

St. Paul's words of holy wisdom when it comes to our human relationships are those we heard a bit ago, words from Ephesians chapter 4:

"Always be humble and gentle. Patiently put up with each other and love each other. Try your best to let God's Spirit keep your hearts united. Do this by living in peace." And the reason we are to do this is so that we are living lives that are *worthy* of God's people. We are called to live in peace with others because doing so honors the God who loves each and every one of us.

We began this series several weeks ago with a message from Pastor Mark about our call to love God and neighbor. According to Jesus, this is the most important commandment we have ever received from God.

Loving God and neighbor go hand-in-hand: if we love God, then we will seek to love all our neighbors. On the flip side, if we do *not* seek to love all our neighbors, we are falling short in our love of God.

Some people are *easy* for us to love...while others are a constant challenge. In fact, when it comes to some of the strained relationships in my life, I have often thought, "Well, God, you are definitely doing hard and holy work on me through *this* person, aren't you?!"

And, again, when it comes to strained, human relationships, the choice we all have is to intentionally work to *improve* the relationship...or to let the relationship go.

A Facebook friend recently posted a parable from German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer once famously compared the human race to a bunch of porcupines.

By nature, the porcupines want to relate to one another. However, they discover that, when they get too close to each other, their sharp quills poke and stick. So they move apart, keeping each other at a safe distance. Yet, there are times when the distance seems unbearable; like in the cold of winter.

So the porcupines try, once again, to huddle close. Unfortunately, as they huddle, their quills, again, poke and stick, causing harm to one another.

Schopenhauer said, "The colder it gets outside, the more we huddle together for warmth; but the closer we get to one another, the more we hurt one another with our sharp quills. And in the lonely night of earth's winter, eventually we begin to drift apart and wander out on our own and freeze to death in our loneliness."

Friends, the good news is that God created us human beings to love and to be loved – to be in relationship with one another.

Though we all have prickly bits – quirks and sharp edges that make us difficult to relate with at times – God's desire for us is never live in loneliness, protected by our armor of porcupine-like quills. No.

As human beings, created by God and in God's image, we are like puzzle pieces made for the same puzzle – we are designed to fit together. And, when we find that we are not quite fitting the way we would hope – when our relationships become strained – God calls us to the holy work of healing...walking alongside us, every step of the way.

Let us pray.