

This is the second of a three part sermon series called “Rebuilding Relationships”. Today’s sermon is “It Begins With Me” and I’ll aim to say more about how to be less anxious in all our relationships as we continue through this pandemic.

Like many of you, I listen to podcasts a lot. Recently I heard an interview with Ian Cron, he’s known for his work with the Enneagram - which is like a personality typology. Ian Cron coaches professional leaders and CEOs and in this podcast he told this story. This last year, frequently he’d get frantic calls from leaders as their work day was beginning saying they were freaked out by this or that and were extremely anxious. And after listening to them, Ian would ask, “What’d you have for breakfast today?” Which would usually be met by silence and they’d say, “Well I didn’t have any breakfast, I didn’t have time.” Then he’d ask them, “When was the last time you exercised?” “How much water have you been drinking?” “How much sleep have you gotten in the last three nights?” “When was the last time you had fun.... Just messed around?” And he said most of the time, two, three or four of these things just hadn’t been addressed. So he’d tell them, “You go address these four things and then call me back.” Seven out of ten times, they’d actually address those issues and their stress levels would go way down. They just weren’t taking time to start with themselves, with their own thinking and needs - they were focusing on everyone else, but themselves.

Focusing on our own development and functioning helps everything and everyone else around us also calm down so that we can rebuild and create healthy relationships.

In this sorta, maybe, kinda post pandemic time as we make our way back into social life - rebuilding relationships and beginning new ones has to begin with our own healthy functioning - It Begins with Me.

Though the basics are important and do need to be addressed - regular healthy habit - , there are a few other key elements to our own healthy functioning I’m going to mention today - elements that continue to help me all the time. Before I go into them, I also want to say that these elements are targets to reach for only. One of the phrases from our methodist heritage I love is “Going on to perfection.” My favorite part of going on to perfection is that perfection never includes actually

reaching perfection, but realizing that it’s only a target. If we ever think we’ve reached perfection - we know that’s anything BUT perfection. So as I speak today, know that I’m describing targets for us to reach toward and that working on these things is a life-long, creative and life-giving process.

To help introduce these elements, let’s look at our scripture passage for today. It’s probably a very familiar passage and one of the best stories of the old testament. Ann already read it out loud for us, but you’ll find out that I like to encourage everyone who is willing, as we gather for worship on Sunday, to bring your own Bible or use a Bible app or you can use the Bibles we have in the back of the church, but please open with me to - Genesis - the first book in the Bible - Genesis 37 verses 1 thru 11.

These verses begin a much longer story about Joseph that runs through to the end of Genesis - 50 chapters. This story is an important part of our Biblical history and if you’ve never read all of it, I encourage you to make it a goal to read this whole story for yourself starting today. And if you do - and if you have questions or comments about it, don’t hesitate to contact me to discuss it. I love hearing your thoughts about the Bible. But this story is not just about Joseph, right? Who is it also about? Look in verse 2 - this is a story of _____? The family of Jacob, who is Joseph’s father. So this story is about this whole family.

One way to describe this particular part of Joseph’s family is to say it’s his Family of Origin - the family he grew up in - his brothers, sisters (though we don’t hear about them in this part), his biological parents and as happens frequently in the Old Testament, his father’s other wives - this is Joseph’s Family of Origin -the family he grew up in.

Last week I talked about how we live in an emotional SYSTEM. This story describes it well. Our lives intertwine with the lives of others like a web so everyone we interact with affects everyone else - it’s a SYSTEM. I also said last week that we are emotional beings - whether we like it or not. We have this basic part of our brains, the lower part most living creatures have, which is instinctive, automatic, reactive, mindless, defensive and either acute or chronic experiences of anxiety can cause us to be reactive based on that lower

fight or flight part of our brain rather than being thinking individuals responding from our frontal cortex.

Our families of origin have a LOT to do with how we function in other relationships like with our co-workers, our church family, our own current nuclear family - our own children or spouse to name a few - or in other organizations or groups we are a part of. Taking time to be more interested in and aware of OUR family of origin, and, specifically, to remain connected to those people, can REALLY help us in relationships beyond our family. This is my first key element - taking time to be more interested in and aware of our family of origin can REALLY help us in relationships beyond our family of origin to decrease anxiety everywhere.

For instance, one thing we learn about Joseph's family in scripture, which is described in verses 3 & 4 if you'll look with me - is this "Now Israel (which is another name for Joseph's father Jacob) - so in other words, Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; And he made a richly ornamented robe for him. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him."

Right away we have an intricate picture of family dynamics - their emotional system. These words specifically say Jacob loved Joseph more, because he had been born to him in his old age. When we think more about that family system this makes sense. The tradition in those days was that the first-born male would receive the family inheritance and birth-right, they'd be the most important child in the family. Though Joseph wasn't Jacob's first-born son among all his wives -and he had four - Joseph WAS the first-born of his most loved wife - Rachel. We can read earlier in Genesis that quote - "Jacob was in love with Rachel" and also "Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah", who was Rachel's older sister Jacob was tricked into marrying first. So although Joseph was son number 11 of 12, emotionally for Jacob, Joseph was the most important son and, it seems in his mind, genetically the first-born and was given all the rights and honors of that position.

This also helps us understand HOW and WHY Joseph had the self definition - a strong enough sense of self - to share his pretentious dreams with his OLDER brothers. One of the facts of family systems is that

sibling position tends to develop personality traits. Dr. Walter Toman was the first to describe sibling-position traits in families and he suggested that a person's birth order has a lot to do with personality development. Generally thinking in terms of older, middle and youngest child, the thought process is that the oldest child finds it easier to assume leadership and responsibility and take care of things - the youngest child finds it easier to be creative or a free spirit. The middle child may have characteristics of both older and younger.

Joseph - in our Biblical story today - was one of the youngest siblings, so Toman's work would suggest he wouldn't have been a leader or a strong free thinker - except that every family is totally unique. So in Joseph's family - since his father saw Joseph as genetically the best and most loved, the first-born in his old age, Joseph was probably raised to believe he was more important and more powerful than his older siblings. So when Joseph had those dreams of power and leadership, he didn't lack any courage - he had a very strong sense of self - in telling everyone about who God had created him to be.

Another example is MY family of origin. I'm the youngest in a family of four children, which would suggest I'd be disinclined to leadership and more interested in being creative and a free spirit. However - every family - like yours - is totally unique. I'm the youngest, however, I'm the only girl after three boys. And my oldest brother is 14 years older, the next is 12 years older and the last is 7 years older than myself. Alfred Adler, another pioneer in the study of birth order suggested that if there is a five year gap or more between children, that child may be treated more like an only child. Which, as I think back about my adolescent years, that was definitely more than my experience than being the youngest child. By the time I remember a whole lot, my brothers were already gone from the house and it was just my mom, dad and me.

So here I am today, a pastor of a church and I'm aware that I relate to people from the experience of an only child and ALSO the only, youngest girl. Which is kind of a scary combination - you ask my brothers or my husband. I can be a bit of a princess and am also happy to be in charge. Whew!

Once again - the key here is that being aware of, and interested in, our own family of origin helps us understand interactions in our other relationships and reduce anxiety in them.

One more element I'll mention today is a second idea from our Bible story - Joseph was able to differentiate himself from his family, he was able to be a strong self. Differentiating is knowing where other people end and we begin. It's having good boundaries and knowing ourselves and what we think. Look at verses 5 thru 10 again.

Joseph's brothers hated him because of his dreams and what he said - and even though his father, who loved him the most, rebuked him - Joseph still clearly spoke his mind - without malice. People with higher levels of differentiation, knowing who they are - where one person ends and they begin - have more ability to use their objective thinking to choose how to act in relationships. People with lower levels of differentiation, or self - don't do their own thinking and mesh with others - - - they tend to react on their emotions of the moment instead of using a strong thinking brain - sometimes to their own detriment and the detriment of their relationships. Differentiating - doing our own thinking and acting out of our beliefs helps us build healthy relationships and reduce anxiety all around us.

It's interesting to me, that as Joseph's story unravels through the rest of the book of Genesis, though he is hated by his brothers, rebuked by his father, captured and sold as a slave by his brothers, and then wrongly accused and sent to jail by his master, not only does he continue to be a strong individual asserting his own thoughts and beliefs, but we don't have any words in this story about resentment or revenge over those who wronged him. There is no malice in his differentiation. Instead of reacting to others - he just keeps moving forward with what he thinks is right, without being mean to others.

Continuing to differentiate - to be a strong self, doing our own thinking and moving toward our convictions without malice - especially toward those who don't agree, is a key element in building healthy relationships and reducing anxiety with everyone.

Many of you know that my daughter, Mara completed her Girl Scout gold award recently. Her project was to videotape grandparents reading a favorite children's book, telling a family story related to the book and then giving the video to the grandchildren as a family heirloom. Mara got this idea from one of the members of my past church - Betty Mohelnbrock. Betty had a background in primary education and when she began to work with children, she was convicted in her spirit that reading to them would change their lives. So she began a nonprofit company called United Through Reading. This nonprofit helped military service members be videotaped reading a book for their children and the children would receive the video and the new book before parents was deployed. Over one million service members were benefited by that ministry over the 20 years she ran it and in 2008 it was officially adopted by the military into their own programs. Even more incredible than that, in 2010 Betty launched a second non profit called Reading Legacies. This new venture provides opportunities for incarcerated individuals to be videotaped reading a book to their children so that while they are away serving their sentences, they can continue to be connected to their children and their children can be transformed by a shared-reading experience.

United Through Reading, the first program with the military was supported by many, but she's finding that Reading Legacies' new vision for incarcerated individuals is a lot more difficult to get support for. But Betty continues to differentiate, to move toward her conviction and her call to this endeavor. And I see in her relationships and in her life not much anxiety at all and a lot more joy.

I hope these thoughts and this Bible passage have encouraged you to be interested in knowing more about your family of origin - the family you grew up with - and have given you a desire to differentiate - do your own thinking without malice toward others - knowing that these two elements can help rebuild relationships and decrease our anxiety everywhere. Next week, the last sermon in this series will touch on common signs of anxiety in our relationships so we can be more aware of them and choose to rebuild healthy relationships instead.