

I need to start with a confession. This three-part sermon series I've been giving - Rebuilding Relationships - is a series I prepared and already preached as the final three sermons at my previous church. So you're getting "used" material. Dum dum dum.

But I knew these messages would be the culmination of what I passionately desired to leave with that congregation and what I passionately desired to begin with here at this one. So I did have a plan. I also knew that packing, moving, unpacking and beginning to get to know this congregation would leave me preoccupied with many things instead of sitting at Jesus' feet - as it were - and have a full well to draw from to create a sermon.

It turns out, that experience relates precisely to the content of this last sermon - Staying in My Lane - understanding common signs of anxiety in our relationships so we can be aware of them and choose to rebuild healthy relationships instead.

If you haven't heard either of the first two messages in this series, I encourage you to watch on our youtube channel or Facebook page or, for the first time today, you can also pick up copies of the sermon series in the Narthex as you leave.

In this sorta, maybe, kinda post pandemic time as we make our way back into social life - the aim of this series is to help us focus on rebuilding relationships and beginning new ones based on our own healthy functioning.

For me, this past few months of preparing to move and lead a different congregation, honestly, has been an experience of acute anxiety on top of our previous acute anxiety related to the pandemic. As I've said in the previous two sermons, anxiety itself is a part of being human. Everyone experiences anxiety. But if we understand ourselves and the family we grew up in, our family of origin better, we can choose to think and respond in healthier ways rather than react with our lower brain, which just causes more problems. I'm continuing to learn this with all of you.

I said my experience of moving here and beginning to learn all about this congregation related precisely to today's content. So let me explain by looking with you at our scripture lesson. This is another well known passage from the gospel of Luke, but hopefully God will help us breathe some new life into it

today. As I've been saying and you're learning, I like to encourage everyone to look for themselves at the Bible passages we study in worship. Thank you Brian for reading this for us, but now those of you who will, open with me to the gospel of Luke chapter 10 starting at verse 38.

What stood out for you as you heard this passage today? Anything new you wonder about you want to study, look into more this week? I hope so. Curiosity is a fabulous quality to have as we read scripture.

For me, as I studied these words again, two things stood out. They happen to be two of the 5 common signs of anxiety in relationships. I'll explain these two in depth now, then lightly touch on the other three.

Sometimes when we encounter this passage about Martha, Mary and Jesus one of the things that stands out is that Martha is a "do-er" and Mary is a "thinker", though there are many different words to describe these two stances we tend to talk about diametrically.

Sometimes we associate ourselves with either Martha or Mary rather than seeing that most of us are actually a combination of them. Regardless, it's true that Martha seems to be a busy person, preoccupied with "many things", as Jesus says. One of the five common signs of stress or anxiety in relationship systems is something called "overfunctioning/underfunctioning" - "overfunctioning/underfunctioning". In this passage, it's clear that Martha takes over the responsibilities of the moment in the absence of help from others, especially her sister Mary. Since Martha's name is mentioned first in this passage, it's likely she's the eldest sister and it probably comes naturally to her to take responsibility, to take charge. If you heard last week's message about the importance of our family origin and birth order this will make sense to you. In many cases a person who's the oldest or only child will more easily take on the stance of overfunctioning during times of stress. It's a way of temporarily relieving anxiety. Overfunctioning looks like me being preoccupied with packing, moving, unpacking and setting lots of meetings with you all - so I just don't have time to sit with my true feelings about the reality of a huge change in my life coming here to be your new pastor. Overfunctioning is a way of temporarily relieving internal anxiety or external

conflict with others instead of being aware of difficult feelings in difficult situations and dealing with them. I say temporarily, because most of the time if we do this, the anxiety just returns, because it isn't really addressed, it's just shoved down for a while.

In this passage, Jesus' arrival with his disciples creates a frenzy of hospitality obligations. In those days women usually took on that role of hospitality. But since we're able to observe it from afar, it's interesting to see Martha & Mary's family system at work. As the story says, Martha was preoccupied or greatly troubled with many things. From her perspective, she took on all the work, because Mary wasn't doing her part. The question is, did Martha's overfunctioning contribute to Mary's underfunctioning? Systems theory suggests that's the just case. If Martha had been able to take a stand with her true thinking about what she could handle or what she believed her role should and not overfunction in order to relieve her anxiety - it would have created a vacuum which others, possibly Mary, could have filled those vacuums and done their part.

In my home, if other family member's dishes have been in the sink for a while and begin to feel anxious about that. I've learned to not relieve my anxiety by overfunctioning and washing them, but to withstand the temporary pain of it. The amazing thing is, when I choose not to overfunction, it doesn't allow others to underfunction. Instead it creates an opportunity for others to do their part. And miraculously, they usually do. Can you see how this example could work anywhere - even in a church?

If we notice that we're overfunctioning or start to be upset about another's underfunctioning, that's a sign that we're feeling very anxious. It's a sign that we're not doing a good job of staying in our lane, of defining ourselves, of doing our own thinking and taking a stand about what we believe while staying lovingly connected.

The second thing I noticed in this passage, which you might have also, was Martha's request of Jesus in verse 40. "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" I love that! It makes me laugh. It's so familiar.

This points to the second common sign of anxiety in relationships - triangling. Triangling is just like it sounds - bringing a third person into a situation to

temporarily relieve the anxiety in a two-person relationship.

Roberta Gilbert says it this way in her book, Extraordinary Relationships, "The human dyad is so unstable that when two people who are important to each other develop a problem, which they invariably do, they automatically look around for a third person to include in the anxious situation in some way. Thus the anxiety is temporarily relieved by sharing it with a third person."

An example of a triangle found consistently in families is the one among two parents and a child. If there is some situation causing anxiety between spouses, quite often that anxiety will be relieved by the parents focusing instead on a problem they see in the child.

In her book, Gilbert describes a husband and wife who spend countless hours bonding over concern for their rebellious young adult son - who it seems becomes even more rebellious the more they focus on his behavior instead of their own relationship.

When things continued to just get worse, the father decided it wasn't in anyone's interest to worry about their son's actions. Instead he worked on getting emotionally neutral in the triangle while staying connected to both his wife and son. As he worked on that he found anxiety decreased in their whole relationship system. No matter how anxious his wife would get about their son, he'd work on listening calmly, considering his own thoughts on the situation and responding more calmly than his wife. He'd also add that he was certain she'd work out her concerns directly with their son. AND he didn't offer advice or suggestions on how to do that.

The husband's work at detriangling helped his wife get control of her own anxiety and communicate more thoughtfully and calmly with their son, who in turn began to copy his parents by taking thoughtful interest in his own life direction.

In a sense, this is what Jesus did in our passage. Look at verse 41 with me - how does Jesus respond to Martha? First, the double statement of her name - Martha, Martha, is an immediate signal of his effort to speak tenderly and without his own anxiety. Then he calmly states his own beliefs on the issue - in his thinking, Mary made a good choice for herself and he wasn't going to get involved in trying to change her.

Jesus stays in his own lane. He doesn't get involved in the triangle, but lets Martha & Mary continue to work things out for themselves.

When we consider talking to one friend about another friend, rather than talking directly with the original friend, that's a sure sign of anxiety in ourselves and a place where we might need to work at defining ourselves better with that friend. Staying in our lane by doing our own thinking and directly communicating will create much healthier relationships.

The last three signs of anxiety in relationships are:

Distancing

Cutoff and

Patterns of Conflict

Distancing is pretty straight forward. When a friend, family member or co-worker begins to find ways to get away from us or we find ways to get away from them, that's a sure sign there is some anxiety needing to be addressed. There's something we need to do our own thinking about and then calmly make clear in that relationship.

Cutoff is the more severe form of distancing. Most of the time we practice cutoff when we've gotten fused with someone and are trying to create clearer boundaries. Rather than talking about what we really think or taking action based on what we think - the easier reaction is to distance from them - or more severely - to cut them, or ourselves, out of their lives completely. Again, this doesn't bring peace, instead it spreads anxiety in other areas.

Lastly, those relationships where we tend to experience intense disagreement, then intense closeness - are patterns of conflict. It's an emotional ping-pong that sometimes includes physical, verbal or emotional abuse. Again, this is a way we temporarily relieve anxiety in a relationship. Though some suggest "getting your feelings out" or learning to "fight fair" could change this pattern, the best change would probably come by stopping the focus on the other person and begin to focus on ourselves more. Staying in our own Lane.

When I thought about what I wanted to preach in my first three weeks here and in the last three there, I knew right away that I wanted to share these ideas about rebuilding healthier relationships. It's my deepest hope that you continue to be curious about the family you

grew up in and how that system affects your life today and that you continue to work on being less anxious in all your relationships. We are Not Alone. It Begins with Me. as we Stay in Our Own Lane.

It's an honor to be your new Pastor. Thank you for welcoming me. I look forward to growing in faith and love beside you for as long as God allows me to be among you.