

Like Brothers and Sisters    2 Thess 2: 13-17

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Today, my sisters and brothers, we begin by talking about ...brothers and sisters. In Greek the word “adelphos” includes both brothers AND sisters, unlike our English word. We have to resort to the awkward word “siblings” when we want to include all genders. Many families now have single children, but most of us of a certain age do have brothers and/or sisters, and we know what it’s like: the good, the bad, and the ugly of it! You can tell all your funny stories about your “adelphos” during coffee hour.

I have two big brothers, nine and ten years older than me. For about the first eight years of my life I was stuck in the role of “baby sister”, emphasis on baby. Then when they both went away to college I was more like an only child. I am very aware of how both of those patterns: spoiled baby sister and only child are still very active in my life. It’s also no surprise that my significant other is almost as old as my brothers; all my boyfriends were. We all know how ingrained those relationship patterns are, and until our parents are finally gone from our family reunions – and often even beyond that point – we keep recreating the emotionally reactive behavior that we learned so early. It takes an extremely self-aware, self-differentiated individual to re-program the behavior of that early Self. I love my brothers dearly, and at the same time I’m still aware of the well-worn ways in which we seem to interact long after our parents have passed.

Families operate as systems, and that means the actions of one family member affect the actions of all the others. Too often families reduce their anxiety and stress in that system by casting members into roles like “The Hero”, “The Caregiver”, “The Problem Child.” Therapists are aware of these kind of dynamics and usually insist on treating the whole family, because the “problem” may not be exactly what it seems, but instead can be a projection of all their troubles and anxieties onto the one the family has designated as the badly-behaved, or sick, one.

Family systems theory is very complicated stuff – as our friend Danielle who is doing a course on this very subject at the Vermont School of Ministry will tell you. Its application to church systems and the interactions found within congregations is research that came out well after I was out of seminary. In reading and classes since then, however, I realize how valid a systemic understanding of the church is. Churches are like big families, full of brothers and sisters, and sometimes even fathers and mothers if ministers or other strong leaders happen to be cast in that role. Often all the brothers and sisters in a church fall into unconscious roles and patterns of behavior that we may have learned in our families of origin long ago. Sometimes that works out well, for us and for the church; we get helpers and healers and theologians. And other times, it doesn't work so well.

Whenever there are additional stresses in the church system - anxiety about falling attendance, or failing finances, or roofs that need replacing – that anxiety has to be “bound” somewhere, according to Murray Bowen, one of the first proponents of this theory. Unconsciously, the church family finds a weak link in its system and names him or her as THE problem.

Systems theory is fresh in my mind right now because of a boundary training class last Monday sponsored for all clergy of the Vermont Conference. Boundary training? you may ask. Is that about the Wall on the border? Or about Robert Frost's poem called Fences? Hardly.

Boundaries are about learning to identify our own reactive emotional behavior, and how to differentiate ourselves from the system within which we operate. Without this self-awareness, we will find ourselves fulfilling our own needs, for control or for needing to be needed, without recognizing what we are doing. If that sounds like total gibberish to you, I will be happy to talk more about it, or to find you something to read or study that will help to make sense of it for you.

It's hard to get enough perspective – in time and in distance – to see what's really going on within a congregational system. And it's even harder to change the patterns of behavior which maintain it. After four months with you have I begun to get some overall understanding of First Church's family, some perspective on what happened in the "conflict" of last year and some idea of how to relieve the anxiety still with us.

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Ok, brothers and sisters, I can't really call what you've been listening to so far a sermon. I believe a sermon is directly inspired by God's Word. Worse, this week I did something I hate to do in preaching: I went to find a scripture that says what I want it to say, rather than listening to what that scripture wants to say to me. It's called "Proof-texting" and its not best practice. I lucked out: one of the lessons appointed for today is 2 Thess.

Whenever you need some good advice about churches and the way they behave and don't behave, turn to the epistles, letters written to the very first Christians who had many of the same problems we do 2000 years ago. Thessalonica was the first big city that Paul and his friends came upon in their missionary tour to Europe. They went to Philippi before that, but it was a village compared to Thessalonica, plunked down in the middle of several intersecting trade routes, by land and by sea. It was a big enough city that it actually had a synagogue for the Jews in diaspora. That's where Paul first went to preach, and where many became believers in Jesus Christ. But there was also a sizeable chunk of the synagogue that didn't like the new Jesus folk, and begin to persecute them, isolate them, and drive them out of town.

In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul taught a lot about the end times, and like many other new Christians, these folk were eagerly awaiting Jesus' return. But by the time we get to the second letter, there have been rumors spreading about Paul's teaching causing a lot of distress.

In Chapter 2 verse 2, the church members are asked not to "become easily unsettled or alarmed" a word derived from being shaken. In fact, some separate historical sources indicate that the year 51 A.D. in which this letter was probably written, there were an unusual number of earthquakes. Surely it was a time of much anxiety, maybe politically, but unquestionably fear of the physical end times as well as fear of the theological earthquake being spread among them. They are worried and distracted about many things, to borrow the phrase from the gospel of Luke. Anxiety is free-floating and unbound.

This atmosphere feels oddly familiar to us, posed as we are almost on the eve of the election, this divisive campaign that has sometimes felt like the end of the world. The hatred which has been spawned, not only between parties but unfortunately between the races and classes and genders, is unprecedented. The shaking of the foundations of our democracy puts us all in a state of anxiety and fear. The wars and the millions of refugees around the world, not to mention the number of dictators and demagogues, put us on high alert. We are fearful, and emotionally reactive.

Instead, can we adopt these assurances in Paul's letter into our own situation? You children of God, you who are distracted and anxious about many things, You are the same sisters and brothers called by God, called through having heard the amazing story of Jesus Christ and the gift of his life for all of us. You are the ones chosen to be the first fruits in his Kingdom. You are made holy by the Spirit. You are made holy by believing in the truth and living it.

“So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions.” says the apostle Paul.

Wait, what? I don't like that. It sounds like “circle the wagons and dig in the trenches” Going back to family systems theory, it sounds like keep on doing things in the ways you've always done them. (sing) Tradition!! Behave just like you've always behaved.

Word study comes to my rescue. Stand firm and hold fast – those verbs mean just what they sound like in English. But traditions? The Greek word “paradosis” means “That which was given to you; the teaching that was transmitted to you” Is that just a catechism or a piece of paper? No way.

In the case of Paul he means “do what you have seen and heard in me,”. He and the other evangelists intend to be living examples of how God calls us to live and behave, based in the way Jesus lived before him.

Stand firm and hold fast to the way of Christ. Do not hold onto what seems the best course of action to you, individually. Do not hold onto what seems the most traditional course of action to you and your fellow church members. But stand firm and hold fast to the way of living and behaving like Jesus the Christ, the inspiration given to you by the Holy Spirit.

That might mean you actually have to change, as the world changes around you. That might mean that you actually have to let go of the controls, or even that you might have to be the one to pick up the reins. It invites you to put the course and action of your life into the loving and capable hands of God. No matter what.

Anxiety often causes us to act in ways that are far from godly, in ways that are reactive rather than responsive, in ways that can cause damage to our intimate relationships, with family or friends. That’s not the way we want it to be. That’s not the way God wants it to be.

God invites us to let go of all that anxiety through our trust in God's eternal promise of life. Paul blessed those Christians in Thessalonica, long ago, with these words:

“ Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word.”

Brothers and sisters in this First Church, do not let your hearts be anxious, neither let them be afraid. Strengthen your hearts, that we might become more aware of how it is that we live together, how it is that we behave graciously toward one another, and how it is that we live in hope even when the world seems hopeless. Guide us toward your future in our families, in this church family, and in this nation. AMEN.