

Family Matters: Out of Control

Psalm 145:8-14
Romans 7:15-25

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Faith Community

One of the great memories I have of Vacation Bible School as a little kid has precious little to do with the lessons, projects and games. Instead, it's Kool Aid and graham crackers. Before you write me off as a heartless childhood glutton, please understand that that treat gave me a feeling of welcome. It was good to be there, and for all I know that was one of the building blocks of what was to come.

Now that I'm an old guy and look back on countless years of VBS, I'm grateful for all the ways that such spirits of welcome and belonging continue to be expressed.

Another memory I'm forever grateful for, this one just a few years back, is when the theme was simply, 'Jesus loves you!' Every day the leaders would shout out a situation in which we need to be reminded, and the kids would respond with equal volume:

**Even when you feel left out, Jesus loves you.
Even when you're different, Jesus loves you.
Even when you don't understand, Jesus loves
you.**

Those were from the first three days, and I tell you that because of how today's New Testament reading blends with that third one.

If you were asked what some of the most difficult things to say might be, you might include these:

I was wrong
I'm sorry
I need help

Some people can go a lifetime without saying them, or at least it seems that way. You might even think the apostle Paul was like that since he was such a

Tough
Take charge
Motivated
Never let them see you sweat kind of guy

But here this hard driver bares his soul for all the world to see, with these three words:

I don't understand.

This wasn't a problem of intellect. It was more personal and vulnerable than that:

I don't understand why I act the way I do. (Romans 7:15, CEV)

Maybe Paul wasn't as tough a guy as we thought. Or maybe his toughness was on a deeper level, and we're the ones who've been deceiving ourselves.

Friends, the greatest opportunity for emotional, spiritual and relational healing is when we come to terms with reality, especially when that reality is painful. It's exactly why step one is step one in Alcoholics Anonymous.

We admitted we were powerless over our addiction - that our lives had become unmanageable.

Or as Paul put it,

I don't understand why I act the way I do.

You can see this among people when some kind of destructive behavior is going on. Everyone is hurting, and as crazy as it seems, all too often everyone has a part in keeping it going.

Years ago I dated a girl whose extended family showed me how that can happen.

An aunt and uncle of hers had two sons, my girlfriend's cousins. Son A, the firstborn, was an all American boy. He got good grades, was a superb athlete, and was popular at school; he had it made. Son B was the opposite. His grades were horrible. He was an awkward social outcast. If there was no trouble to get into, he came up with his own.

One evening my girlfriend and I went to a ball game in which Son A was the winning pitcher who also batted in a few runs, undoubtedly the hero of the game. A family picnic followed which included a different kind of drama.

Some kind of altercation developed between Son B and his father. A shouting match ensued, and the boy ran off by himself into the nearby woods.

After his very public departure his father declared, just as publically, 'The kid's just no good.' We all heard him, including Son A. No one tried to track down Son B. They let him go. So, after a while he stumbled back on his own, and there was nothing more for anyone to say.

For some reason I never forgot that night, and years later during my clinical training got a clue as to why.

In most families or businesses or groups, everyone has a part to play in keeping the thing going. The grass needs to be cut, meals prepared, that kind of thing.

The same thing happens at a deeper, emotional level, with everyone playing a part as well. It's like a mobile, a work of art in which everything is in balance. If you so much as touch one of the parts, everything moves until the balance is restored. The same thing applies to families, businesses and groups.

Systems theorists tell us that when there's a problem that's too painful to face head on, it still gets addressed, but at a deeper level, as people take on roles in an effort to keep the thing going. Two of those roles are sometimes called the hero and the goat, or Son A and Son B in the story I just told you. Attention gets focused on other things while the real issues get a pass.

Sometime later we learned that the boys' parents were caught up in a horribly painful and bitter divorce that they thought they were keeping from the kids. Whether they knew the details or not, there was no mistaking the tension and anxiety in the family, and so the boys offered their own drama in a subconscious effort to keep everything in balance, at least on the surface. And while Son B was obviously troubled, Son A, the hero, was as well.

The real issues were way too traumatic for anyone to deal with openly, or so they thought, so other dramas took center stage. The end result was that the marriage died and every member of the family was left with serious emotional issues. Everyone pays a price when everyone plays a part in keeping an unhealthy system going.

Here's the pattern: as long as I can point to something or someone over there as the source of the problem, whether it's a person, political party, point of view, or whatever, I don't need to deal with what's 'in here' which may, in fact, be

the real issue. The problem, of course, is that everyone is stuck and nothing changes.

The real breakthrough comes when we muster the courage to say, with the apostle Paul,

I don't understand why I act the way I do.

When you reach that point, you will find your greatest opportunity for emotional, spiritual, relational and sometimes even physical healing, because then you can take the crucial step:

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:24-25)

Then you'll find the last two themes from that year of Vacation Bible School coming alive in you:

**Even when you've done wrong, Jesus loves you.
Even when you're afraid, Jesus loves you.**