

Holy Relations: Is Blood Thicker than Water?
Stories from the Hebrew Bible
February 11, 2007

“Blood is thicker than water!” Do you know where that proverb came from? Its origin actually goes back to the 12th century in its original form in Germany. In English its roots can be traced to 15th century and in its present idiom it came from Sir Walter Scott’s novel, *Guy Mannering* in 1815. “blud’s thicker than water,” said Sir Walter Scott. A modern rendering in English is “relatives stick together; one will do more for relations than for others.”

I am in week four of my sermon series, “Holy Relations.” We have been examining romantic love, but this week we will be shifting to love in our families. This kind of love in the Greek is termed *storge* or what C.S. Lewis terms “affection.” This is best exemplified as the love between a parent and a child. Most parents are naturally wired for this kind of unconditional love in which they will go to great personal sacrifice for the well being of children. This topic has been on my heart for a couple of months now. As I look around our congregation we are at an age when many of our parents are approaching life’s end. We have several in our church family lose parents in recent months and are dealing with the intense grief of losing a parent. At the same time others in our church family are dealing with conflict within the nuclear family of parents who have not fully accepted our sexuality, or have been in denial, or have not fully accepted our partners. Some have suffered from painful marginalization from our families. On the other hand, others have experienced intense *storge* love from our parents in PFLAG as symbolized by the rainbow stole I am wearing. Wherever you are in the continuum of

this topic, “blood is definitely thicker than water.” And blood relations can get quite sticky, can’t they?

My major goal is to illustrate what contributes to healthy, *storge* love. I will be looking at a variety of stories, from my personal experience as well as the great stories of *storge* love from our Bible. Let me begin with the story of the troubled teenager who lived next door to me in my first home in Dallas. He was the younger of two boys, just sixteen years old. He seemed to always be in trouble. One day that trouble came knocking at my door. As I arrived home one evening I found the glass to my back door broken. Inside where I used to have a 27-inch TV in my living room, there was nothing but a hole in the entertainment center. I reported the theft to the police and received a call from the officer who lived just down the street just a few days later. All over the room were the fingerprints of the teenager next door. They also found a voucher at the local pawnshop where the boy had sold my TV for a little cash. It was an open and shut case. The boy already had a wrap sheet with several misdemeanors. This was just before Christmas and the boy had been sitting in jail for just a couple of days. His mother came over to my house that evening and explained to me that there was a big mix-up and the police had obviously arrested the wrong boy. She pleaded with me to drop charges against her son. I refused saying that he needed to suffer the consequences of his behavior. She glared at me, saying I was a monster for keeping her son in jail so close to Christmas. There was really nothing more I could say. I don’t think we ever exchanged words again while I lived in that neighborhood. That woman thought she was practicing *storge* love for her son.

Contrast this story to one of a young 20-year-old woman. She was always very close to her mother, but they also fought intensely. As this young woman got a little older she fell in love for the first time and began to distance herself from her mother. The arguments got more intense between the two. They seemed to be headed toward estrangement, both convinced that they were right in their conflicts. Many days passed with no communication in either direction, where they had previously talked every day. Finally, the young woman away in college, called her mom and dad on the phone. She shared some of the issues she was facing in school with the pressures to drink and the struggles she faced with depression, a similar depression to the one her mother suffered throughout her life. She told her mother that she loved her and she hoped that they could restore their relationship to one of open, honest and caring communication. A reconciliation was born that day and light appeared on the horizon of a long, lonely night.

These stories are typical of family stories. The first illustrates an unhealthy pattern; the second illustrates a growing health. They illustrate two approaches to the painful issues that arise in families. I want to lift up a resource I have begun to use to practice health in family relations. Its authors are Murray Bowen and Ed Friedman. Their field is that of family systems, a systems approach to the complex world of the nuclear family. This book, *Generation to Generation*, authored by Ed Friedman, applies these family systems, to church relationships. The premise of family systems is that relationships are not simple one-to-one entities but complex with many forces that transcend the principles of simple cause and effect. The goal in becoming a mature human being is to be fully differentiated from your family of origin, and to maintain a non-anxious presence in the midst of stormy times in your relationships. When you are

successful in doing this, you will also become quite successful in being a leader in your family and in other organizations in which you are a part. Three key principles that I want to develop with you in talking about family love are being engaged with your family without being fused, understanding triangulation in relationships, and how successfully engaging people in your family can help you in your other relationships.

The Bible does not use the word *storge* or family love per se. Yet it is filled, particularly in the Hebrew Bible, with colorful stories of family love. Perhaps there is no more tragic and dysfunctional family story than that of King David's family. There is one particularly tragic thread in the encounter between King David and his son, Absalom. David had several wives and many children by these several wives. Particularly tragic is the complex system of relationships involving David and three of his children: Absalom, Amnon and Tamar. Let me give you the synopsis of this sad story from 2nd Samuel and then analyze it from a family systems approach. Absalom had a beautiful sister named Tamar. Tamar and Absalom had a half-brother named Amnon. Amnon lusted for his half-sister, Tamar. He devises a scheme to sexually entrap Tamar and then he rapes her. He then coldly sends her off in shame. Absalom burns with hate for Amnon and arranges for his murder. King David is the ultimate passive Dad and does nothing to intervene. Absalom runs away from the family and longs for a reunion but is ignored by his father, King David. Absalom, filled with unresolved resentment, mounts a competing army to take over Israel from his father and gets very close. His natural charisma leads to a great coup against his dad. King David specifically tells his closest general in an upcoming battle with Absalom's army to not harm his son. But Absalom is caught and summarily executed. King David, in one of the most tragic scenes in all the Bible, is notified of the

death of his son in battle. Overcome with a father's grief, he wails, "O my son Absalom, if only I had died instead of you!" Now this story is ripe with family systems dysfunction. This story is filled with family triangles. First there is the triangle between siblings Absalom, Amnon and Tamar. The anxiety in this family comes to a fever pitch when Amnon rapes Tamar. Before the rape, perhaps Tamar was fused, almost too close to her brother Absalom? We don't really know. David is also a part of the triangle by doing nothing about the situation and then he later disengages Absalom as Absalom builds more and more resentment toward his dad. King David chooses to check out emotionally rather than deal in a real way with the conflict in his family. The result is tragedy in the King David family and in the family of Israel. So how is it in your family? Are there triangular conflicts that have reached the fever pitch? What are doing about them? Are you differentiated or fused? Are you engaged or have you run away?

Another great story of family love appears in the Book of Genesis. It is also the genesis of the beginning of family of God, in the birth of two great nations of Israel and the Arabic world through one patriarch, Abraham. God has promised Abraham and Sarah a son. But Sarah has not gotten pregnant and she decides to take matters into her own hands. So she arranges for her servant, Hagar (an Egyptian) to be the surrogate mother. Hagar becomes pregnant by Abraham. For some reason Sarah becomes jealous and angry at Hagar and Hagar flees into the desert. But God makes a promise of a great nation to Hagar also through her unborn son Ishmael. Hagar obeys God and returns to submit herself to Sarah. Isaac is later born and the two boys begin together in the same family. Sarah once again is angered toward Hagar and Ishmael. She doesn't want the boy to get the birthright or the inheritance so she forces Abraham to send them both off

into the desert. Just as it looks as if mother and son will die in the desert God saves them both. Mother nurtures her growing son who becomes the father of the Arabic world, always in conflict with Israel. But there is a footnote here. At Abraham's death, the conflicting sons, Isaac and Ishmael, are reunited to bury their dad. This story is also filled with triangles of conflict. There are no simple resolutions because there are complex systems at work here. There is both fusing and distancing between the parents and their children. Perhaps the healthiest relationship is between Hagar and Ishmael. Mother is always nurturing but also allows Ishmael to successfully differentiate himself and become a great nation. But the final footnote also provides a lesson. It is through Isaac and Ishmael we learn it at the death of their dad. If you want to improve relationships in all of your life, go have a one-on-one relationship with every member of your family. If your other personal relationships are not quite right, go work on the relationships in your nuclear family, with siblings, with mom and dad, and with children.

Family or *storge* love can also be demonstrated in families of choice. Some of us have found affection is primary not in our biological families but in our families of choice that we have formed. Jesus' family of choice was his disciples, the ones who followed him as he led them to understand the Kingdom of God. Here these words from Mark's gospel, chapter 3, verses 31 through 35. Jesus was the perfectly differentiated human being. I am convinced that he remained attached to his biological family. But he also formed a new family of God, which at its center were the disciples who would launch the church of Jesus Christ. This is your church family, one who will nurture you and hold you accountable. It is a family of choice with whom you can find not only affection but also experience the gracious, unconditional, crazy love of Jesus Christ.