



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

*Creating Healthy Relational
Boundaries, Pt 2:
Separate Yet Close*

John 2:1–12

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Message from November 10, 2019

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RE-INTRO TO SERIES AND LAST WEEK

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In this *Creating Healthy Relational Boundaries* worship series our goal is to help us all create the best relationships we can, with God and those around us. God loves us and wants to love and be loved in great relationships.

Last week we talked about creating boundaries for ourselves as individuals. If we are boundaryless, we allow people to walk all over us. Or we are the ones who do the walking. I gave the examples No-boundary Charlie Brown, who gets used time and again in his relationship with Lucy; neither one of them exercise good boundaries: whether it's Lucy giving him advice for her own profit or pulling the football over and over. And poor pathetic Charlie Brown—unable to set any boundaries—keeps falling into the same relationship trap.

At the same time, we discussed when we create boundaries so thick, it is as if we throw on a suit of emotional armor that makes any real relationship impossible.

We looked at how 1 Corinthians 12 uses the metaphor of the body to emphasize the need for us to have a sense of self, as *individuals* as part of the whole. *Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.* Maintaining individual boundaries is necessary for both the healthiness of the self, AND the health of the community.

And we left off last week knowing that we want to pick up today with how healthy individuals can relate to one another even in emotionally charged and difficult situations. The fancy term for this is self-differentiation.

Self-differentiated we can...

- ...define ourselves while still being in touch with others
- ...draw boundaries with the toxic people in our lives
- ...be decisive, take healthy risks, knowing if we fail it does not define us
- ...disagree with one another about things, and recognize that differences of opinion are relationship breakers.
- ...respond rather than react

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PUSH AND PULL

To be human is to exist in a constant state of push and pull between what it is to be separate as individuals and to be close to others.

When we are at our healthy best we acknowledge that we are distinct from others, yet we are still in relationship with others. Up to this point I have emphasized the need to draw good boundaries for ourselves as individuals—God created us separate selves. That said, God also created us to be in relationships with one another.

FAMILY SYSTEMS

Where are our most profound points of connection? Family and church. They are the places where we have the most at stake and want to be most connected. So it shouldn't surprise us at all that Jesus dealt with the same dynamics in his family. It's true. Do you remember the wedding at Cana, Jesus' debut? The part of that story that gets all the hype is his water to wine party trick. But let's look at how that developed.

JOHN 2.1–7A

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine.'

Right away this is fascinating. Jesus' mother is making a request without really making a request. Hinting around that she wants him to do something; but she's not really owning it and being forthright. We don't want to be too hard on her—being mother to the messiah surely had its challenges. Maybe she was embarrassed for the hosts; maybe she wanted to show off Jesus to her friends. Whatever her motivation, Jesus reacts:

And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.'

Whoa, is that any way to talk to your mother? Jesus sounds a bit more than irritated. Maybe it was the way she asked the question. Maybe this had happened before. Maybe they'd

been arguing on the way to the party. But clearly, there is a relational dynamic at work here.

His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you.' Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim.

So let me get this straight. Mary implies Jesus should do something. Jesus tells her to mind her own business and that he'll do something when he wants to do something. So she turns to the servants and tells them to get ready because he's about to do something. And Jesus does it and the rest is history! Clearly, mother always does know best!

But here's our question: Do any of these push/pull dynamics look familiar to you? Jesus and Mary sorting out their relationship. Pushing and pulling, figuring out how they are separate and connected. Mary pulling Jesus, while Jesus pushes away, then Jesus pulling back and doing what Mary wanted him to do.

This would be a good time to draw back to self-differentiation. *Bowen family systems theory* is a *theory* of human behavior that views the family as an emotional unit and uses systems thinking to describe the complex interactions in the unit. Over time, this theory has been applied to all kinds of organizations, businesses, and places of worship, realizing that as humans we operate similarly in most systems. Last week I said that this theory saved ministry for me. Here's what I learned.

SELF-DIFFERENTIATED WE CAN...

...Define ourselves while still being in touch with others

Self-differentiation is the ability to be grounded and bounded in who we are, while still being connected to others—even in emotionally charged situations. When we are at our best we understand that we are distinct, yet we are connected to others.

An excellent example of defining oneself while still being connected to others happened recently right here. When we

4 were threatened as a congregation with punishment for being open to all, we modeled excellent self-differentiation. Though we were upset, we calmly articulated why we take that openness stand as followers of Jesus, and we communicated that with district leadership. We didn't cut them off, make threats about leaving, stomp our feet. We understood our boundaries, and we still moved towards others in the denomination. **We defined ourselves while still being in touch with others.**

Note, defining oneself can mean that we take a stand on an issue, we draw a firm boundary. It's not: *Well, whatever, they're dumb, I don't care. I will just avoid them.* Think about someone you know who is like that. A person you can disagree with, and that's okay.

...draw boundaries with the toxic people in our lives

Easier said than done, sometimes you just have to move on; at least for now. Especially if the relationship is so toxic that it is abusive. It may be appropriate to cut someone off altogether. Contrary to the way we usually think about it, focusing on the toxic people in our systems rarely works. If you think back to the story I told last week about the young woman who came from a toxic extended family, moved across the country to work on herself, and that helped her family simply by being an example of healthiness and refusing to do the toxic tango with everyone else. It is more effective to work on oneself, and with other motivated people in the system, rather than hyper-focus on the toxic person.

People who are poorly self-differentiated will react when you set your boundaries. They'll tell you that you are being selfish, self-centered, mean. But, when we do this, it both creates a healthier you, and even though they may not like it, a model for a stronger them.

...be decisive, take healthy risks, knowing if we fail it does not define us

Though Rabbi Edwin Friedman started his career in counseling, he was called to apply the very lessons he learned with

families to corporate and even military systems. Friedman notes that one of the predominant symptoms of a dysfunction is the inability to make decisions. We get all tangled in whether the decision is going to be the right decision, the perfect decision. We defer to experts and data and technique, to the point that we often become paralyzed and do nothing. Not that experts and data and technique are bad, but that you can have the smartest experts, the most accurate data, and the best technique in the world and still fail. Friedman argues that the real power for moving forward in a healthy way lies decisiveness, a spirit of adventure, and I would add, a quest to follow God's call. Mistakes may be made, but they will not define us.

...disagree with one another about things, and recognize that differences of opinion are not litmus tests for whether or not we can be in a relationship with someone.

...respond rather than react

I could easily point to our response to the district that I mentioned a few moments ago, but I have a more fun example.

As a person who had been doing his own laundry for decades, I had a system. A way I liked to get the job done, efficiently and effectively. As we all know, when we get married or are in any partnership we have to change the way we do some things and be more flexible. That's cool. So in the beginning of our marriage, Karin would do laundry sometimes I would do the laundry. Then, as our family grew, our laundry grew. That was right about the time we moved here to Etown.

At this time I was working a lot and a lot of off pastors hours, meaning all times of the day, and Karin was working hard at home. So she volunteered to take on the laundry—now, she didn't do it the way that I would have done it.

One day in a conversational tone Karin said, "Hey, what's up with the inside out t-shirts?!" To which I responded "Uh, what?" She explained to me that we had a never-ending pile of laundry and that it would really help if I turned my t-shirts right-side out when I put them in the hamper.

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Well, I have to confess what happens next wasn't my smartest, most sensitive, or least reactive reply. With more than a little bit of defensiveness, I explained, in great detail, *my* system for doing laundry, why I didn't turn my t-shirts right-side out, and I might have mentioned a couple other things she could do better when doing the laundry. And that's the story of how I started doing my own laundry again.

Two lessons for me here. I was reactive, and defensive—I took it personally—when Karin mentioned what would be helpful for her. *What was that all about Greg?! What was really going on with me?*

And, in all seriousness, we have been doing our own laundry for years now, and it's great for both of us. Our love can withstand even differences of opinion regarding when and when not to use bleach, what temperature to set the dryer at, or the merits of turning a t-shirt right-side out. I love you Karin. Secrets for a great marriage.

I wish we had three more weeks on these topics, but we will leave it there for now. These may sound like no-brainers to you. But I invite you to dwell with them a bit. Asking yourself, deep down why you react the way you do sometimes is difficult personal work! But well worth it.

Jesus may have been the epitome of self-differentiation. There are so many examples of Jesus differentiating himself.

Next week Pastor Jason will talk about good relational boundaries in smaller groups of people. Hope you will come again.

