

## RESTART RELATIONSHIPS

Genesis 45:1-19

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It's happened to me a couple of times in the past few years...that a friendship dissolved, slipped away, unraveled...one was a friendship with a colleague. We were working on some projects together, talking frequently, but the last time I saw her things just didn't seem the same.

Another relationship was with a long-time friend, and while we're still acquaintances --we exchange Christmas cards and occasional messages on Facebook, -the closeness and intimacy have changed dramatically.

In both of these cases, I feel that the other person is the one who took a step away from the friendship, but I wonder what their perspective is. And as I reflect on the hurt I feel about these relationships, I wonder how many people feel that I have taken a step away from them.

Friendships change with years. Sometimes you have a friendship that feels right to you at one point in your life but then no longer seems to fit your lifestyle. One friend gets married, the other stays single, and the friendship changes. One friend has children, the other doesn't, and it's hard to maintain friendships when the way you spend your time is so much different. Doug and I have a friend who had a problem with drinking. He stopped drinking, and is much happier and healthier overall, but he says to us that he lost several of his good friends; they just don't call him much any more.

Losing a friendship, for whatever reason, can be painful. But most of us seem to accept that friendships will ebb and flow in our lives. It is our relationships with our relatives that can be most fraught with emotion.

I'll bet that if I took a poll this morning, we would not find a single pew or a single row of chairs without someone who is estranged from a relative. Siblings who no longer talk to each other, strained relationships between in-laws, and - probably the source of most acute pain is when the relationships between children and parents are torn to the point of breaking.

The Bible is a wonderful source to turn to when we want to learn about relationships because no matter how dysfunctional you think your relationships are -- you can probably find one that's worse in the Bible! The Bible lets us know that people aren't perfect, people have never been perfect, yet God still works with us and through us.

Joseph was the second youngest of the 12 sons of Jacob. You may remember the story of the sibling rivalry between Jacob and Esau. Esau was his father's favorite child, but Jacob tricked his father and stole the birthright, the privileges of the firstborn. Jacob and Esau eventually reconciled, but theirs was not exactly an ideal family heritage! Jacob continues in the family tradition and plays favorites. Joseph was his father's favorite, and Joseph shows immaturity by making sure all of the other brothers know it. In a fit of jealous rage, the other brothers have Joseph sold into slavery. They tell their father Jacob that their brother Joseph is dead. But Joseph ends up at the court of the Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, where eventually it is revealed that he possesses wisdom and talent for leadership. Joseph is put in charge of all of the food distribution in Egypt during a time of famine. People come from throughout the land to receive food, and one

day Joseph recognizes, in the food line, his brothers. They would never have expected to see him, of course, so he sees them long before they know who he is. Joseph tricks them, at first, (again, in keeping with family tradition), but then he sees that his brothers are genuinely sorry for what they did to him many years before. They've all grown up. Joseph not only forgives them, but makes sure that they are all taken care of. He reconciles with them, and is reunited with his father.

Their relationships are rekindled, and forgiveness had a great deal to do with it.

Friendships can fade away, family problems can fester like infected wounds, spreading their poison throughout entire family systems. And then there are our most intimate relationships, our relationships with our partners and spouses. These are the ones which require the most tending, the ones which can most often wither from lack of care, from neglect, from bad habits. In my experience counseling couples, most of the time when I see a marriage in crisis it's because of one thing. The couple stopped communicating. A few days go by, not because either person is trying to sabotage the relationship, but just because life is busy. Work, kids, health problems, extended family- just the fatigue of daily life - it all gets in the way. There are things that need to be talked about, but they're hard to discuss. We'll get to them eventually. Let's sweep them under the rug, or keep them in the corner. A few days, then a few weeks, then a few months, and then the tiny dust bunny of a problem has become a monster. Resentments have built, frustrations have grown. Sometimes another person has entered the picture, sometimes a habit of drinking too much or spending too much has ballooned out of control. What would have been one difficult conversation is now one giant conflict. How do you restart?

In all of these cases, with our friends, with our relatives, with our partners, there's a prior question that can only be answered by each of us, answered after prayer and clear thinking and often best answered after talking it over with a trusted counselor. The question is this, "Is it healthy for me to restart this relationship? Is it the right thing to do?" If there's been abuse of any kind, if a relationship has become toxic, if you weren't able to be your best self in a particular relationship, then there are questions that need to be asked. Some relationships need to be left behind.

But once you decide that you want to restart a relationship, the first step is honesty. Telling the other person you value them and the relationship. Speaking the truth in love, without blame or guilt. "We've veered off track somehow and I'm sorry for my part in that." There may need to be a conversation about past mistakes. There may need to be forgiveness offered.

I was talking to a friend not long before Christmas. She was on her way to a family Christmas party and was really dreading it. When I asked her why, she said, "My older sister, she's always the one who tells us what to do. I'm sick of it." Now these are a group of siblings who are all in their 50's and 60's now. Their mother recently died, and that death reminded my friend of when her favorite aunt had died some 30 years ago. My friend cared for the aunt, checked on her every day, brought her food, even though she was also taking care of her young children at the time. She remembers, vividly, her older sister telling her that she was doing too much for the aunt, that the aunt was fine, that she should just take care of her own family. It hurt my friend's feelings, and she has never let go of those words. 30 years she has held those words in her heart. And now that they're all grieving the death of their mother, the words have bubbled to the surface. "I'm not

going to be able to go to that Christmas party and not say something to my sister,” she told me.

How much negative energy has my friend expended over 30 years? Why do we hang on to resentments? Somehow we think that the worst possible thing to do would be to let go of a hurt, to not make someone else pay for what they’ve done to us. But the truth is that holding onto bitterness hurts us far more than the other person, who sometimes isn’t even aware of it. I love this quote. “Refusing to forgive is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.”

There’s a story we tell about what matters most in life. It’s one of those stories that can sound trite and simplistic. Maybe it’s over-used. But it also contains a deep truth. The story goes that when you’re on your death bed, you’re never going to say, “I wish I’d bought more jewelry. I wish I’d driven more expensive cars.” You’re not going to think about your material possessions, even though they may have occupied a lot of your waking moments during your earlier years. No one ever says, “I wish I’d worked longer hours” even though they may have been obsessed with career and with getting ahead. What you’re going to think about are the people you love, those who mean the most to you.

I spend a lot of time with people at the end of their lives. None of them ever say, “I wish I hadn’t forgiven my sister.” No one ever says, “I wish I hadn’t spent so much time making friends; I have too many of them.”

Friends, relatives, our intimate partners: when there are relationships we want to restart, honesty, humility and forgiveness form the pathway.

And in this new year, how would you assess your relationship with God? Has it been sitting on a shelf? Is it one of those items on your to-do list, something you'll get to later? Is it something you dust off every now and then, but never really spend time with?

All of our relationships are living things. They require daily tending, daily care. Just like a houseplant that needs water, fertilizer, and light. Oh, you can skip a day or two, but if you skip a week most plants will suffer or even die. Skip a month and it's too late to revive it. Relationships need pruning from time to time, too; the difficult work of cutting back what isn't growing to make room for new life. As a relationship grows, it may need repotting, new soil, so that it may reach its full potential.

What does your relationship with God look like? Is it a seedling, just barely sprouting, or a full-grown thriving bush? You don't have to nurture it in any traditional way. You don't have to spend time every morning with a devotional book and a Bible. You don't have to get down on your knees by your bedside every night. You may prefer to talk to God while you drive to work, or nurture your faith through one of our bible study classes or book groups. You may find that your best pathway to God is through music, singing in the choir or the worship band. You may want to talk about your prayer life with a friend.

There are dozens of ways to care for a relationship, and new beginnings, thanks be to God, are always possible. Do it now. Don't live, or die, with regrets.