

#### OPENING HYMN

“All Are Welcome,” verse 3, *ELW* 641

#### OPENING PRAYER

Incarnate God, we give thanks today for the gift of family. We praise you for the love, support and fellowship that biological families and families of choice provide, and for the ways they reflect your love and grace in our lives. Deepen our understanding of family as we study together. Amen.

#### MATERIALS NEEDED

- Hymnals (*ELW*)
- Bibles (*NRSV*)
- scrap paper and pens or pencils

# *Where two or more are gathered: Flourishing in relationships*

## Session one

Relationships that form us

BY BROOKE PETERSEN

In this three-part Bible study, we will explore relationships that have formed us, relationships that sustain us and relationships that push us to grow. Guided by biblical friendships, family relationships and kindred bonds, we'll examine not only what the Bible has to say about healthy relationships, but also what we might learn from pastoral and therapeutic theories about what makes for relationships that lead to our flourishing.

### INTRODUCTION

It is known among therapists that as soon as the holidays start creeping toward us, we will likely receive more calls than usual looking to see if we have openings. One could imagine many reasons for this. Holidays can be stressful, the days grow longer and darker, and as the new year creeps closer, people often begin thinking about things that they might want to work on. Although these things may be part of why many people reach out for help, they often do so because they are preparing to spend more time with their families. Whether they are returning to a childhood home or gathering around meals through the season, many people find that being in a family can be hard. When we are together, long-standing disagreements

seem to bubble under the surface. Words are sometimes misunderstood. Tensions can rise as new people are brought into the family. Families are the first places where many of us learned what it means to love and be loved by imperfect people, and they are also places where many of us carry hurts and harms that we struggle to heal.

Some of our most beloved Bible stories involve siblings and the trials and tribulations of relationships within families. In this study, we will examine the stories of two sets of siblings—Jacob and Esau, as well as Mary and Martha—while considering what we learned in our own families about relationships. These biblical siblings will help us explore how our own early family relationships shape the way we think about everyday relationships in our lives.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

1. Families have all kinds of structures. Some families are made up primarily of “chosen” people—dear friends and kindred spirits. Some family members might live with us, and others might be spread far. What does your “family”—the family you come from and the family that you have now—look like?
2. Describe how you understand who is in your family and what shape your family takes.

**BIBLICAL FAMILIES**

When I teach “Introduction to Pastoral Care” classes at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, I assign my students a genogram project. Genograms use symbols to make a “map” of families. They indicate specific traits about people in a family and help us look for patterns that might explain areas of strength and tension within family systems. The hope is that as my students look at these maps,

they will learn more about how their family has impacted the way they approach ministry, both in the strengths that they bring to their work and in the areas where they might grow. By starting with maps instead of interviews, students are often able to learn more about their families as they talk with parents, grandparents and siblings. Stories unfold as they make maps of who had extremely close relationships and who struggled with others, as well as who had difficulty keeping a job and who worked in the same place for their entire life. New ways of understanding their own families become clear as they add to their maps children who have passed or relationships that ended.

Every year, another option for this project is to explore a particular biblical family, making a map of the people, tensions and struggles within those family relationships. Our biblical texts are full of tense families, including siblings Jacob and Esau, with their parents Rebekah and Isaac from the book of Genesis, and siblings Mary and Martha, with their brother Lazarus, from the gospels.

**ARE OUR STORIES ALREADY WRITTEN?**

📖 **Read:** Genesis 25:19-34

Jacob and Esau are locked in a brewing conflict. Even their parents, Rebekah and Isaac, are taking sides. Isaac is the son of Abraham and Sarah. Rebekah is the granddaughter of Milcah and Nahor, Abraham’s brother, making Isaac and Rebekah first cousins, once removed. Rebekah, pregnant with twins in the ancient world, struggled with what was likely a scary, difficult pregnancy. In her struggle, she turned to God, wondering why she was living when these babies struggled so within her. God responded with a divine promise: the two who battle in her womb are two nations who will continue to fight, even as they grow in years. One baby shall be stronger than the other, and the younger shall serve

the elder, an upset of the normal order of things in the ancient world. This divine prophecy tells us that, in many ways, the story of these two brothers has already been written.

Indeed, the brothers' struggle continues through the entirety of their relationship. And their story overturns what was considered the natural, expected order: the first born is favored with a birthright and an inheritance, and easily steps into a rightful place as the patriarch of the family. We know from the beginning that the dynamics and the order of things in this family will be more complicated. Jacob is born grasping the heel of Esau, an allusion to the ways that Jacob will be a trickster in these stories. Later, in early adulthood, Jacob is thoughtful and cunning, a man of the tents, while Esau is a man of the fields, a skilled hunter who doesn't think beyond his immediate needs. And so, when Esau comes back from a hunt famished, "dying" of hunger, he quickly, without considering the consequence, sells his birthright to his brother for nothing more than a bowl of steaming red lentil stew.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

3. What characteristics were you or others in your family known for? Were you the creative one? The sensitive one? The grumpy one? Did those identities fit? Did they ever become difficult, uncomfortable or limiting?

**THE FAMILY DRAMA CONTINUES**

📖 **Read:** Genesis 27

The time has come for Isaac's death. He has to pass along his blessing, a continuation of the blessing God promised to his father Abraham, which passed from Abraham to Isaac, that he will now pass to his eldest son. As readers, we already know this will not be simple story of the continuation of a family line.

Jacob will live up to his name as a trickster. At the encouragement of his mother, he will pretend to be Esau, in order to steal the blessing of his father.

The stage is set for family drama: a mother wants to advance the cause of her youngest son, a father is dying, and two brothers have been suspicious of each other from the beginning. As you read this chapter, try to make a mental map of these various threads. We see: an alignment between a mother and a son, a father anxious to pass along the blessing before his death, the realization of Isaac and Esau that they have been tricked, Esau's sorrow and grief that there is not enough blessing for him to be granted even a portion of what he had been sure was his. There is betrayal, grief, loss, anger and fear.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

4. What did you learn from your own family of origin about conflict? When people disagreed about things big or small, did they talk with each other or ignore the conflict? Was conflict welcomed or something to be feared?

**IS RECONCILIATION REALLY POSSIBLE?**

📖 **Read:** Genesis 33:1-16

Much has happened in the lives of these brothers. Jacob has fled to escape his brother's wrath, only to fall asleep and, in his dreams, learn that God will continue God's promises in his life. Jacob will be blessed with offspring so numerous that "all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring," God says. God further promises: "...I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (Genesis 28:14-15). Jacob falls in love with Rachel, only to be tricked by her father into marrying her

older sister. The trickster has learned that other families are complicated too. He will spend 14 years working for his father-in-law before he is able to marry his first love, Rachel.

The time comes when Jacob dreams that God is calling him to come back to his homeland, the land that is still the home of his brother, Esau. Despite some middle-of-the-night fleeing and being chased by his father-in-law, Jacob does eventually end up back in his homeland, believing in God's promises. Imagine Jacob's surprise to hear that his brother is advancing toward him with a company of 400 men—which can only mean that Esau has not softened in his anger toward Jacob after all these years. Jacob cries out to God, "Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children!" (Genesis 32:11). Jacob sends gifts and servants ahead of him, hoping to soften his brother's certain rage.

In Genesis 33, we encounter another story of unexpected reversal. Jacob and Esau meet but their family reunion isn't filled with rage but tears. Esau embraces his brother, marvelling at his children and wives. Perhaps time has healed the wounds of their childhood. Something has changed. These two brothers go on to live near one another, in bordering kingdoms, until their deaths.

## BEYOND TENSIONS

📖 **Read:** Luke 10:38-42 and John 12:1-8

Only two gospels, the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of John, talk about a family of three siblings named Mary, Martha and Lazarus. There is no shortage of commentaries about the story of the sisters hosting Jesus, often puzzling over what Jesus meant. Are we supposed to ignore the duties that often fall to women in families? Is Martha just a caricature of the over-functioning, frazzled woman who can't

spend time with her guests because she is too busy making sure everything is so perfect—completely missing the point of the party? Or is Mary lazy and ungrateful, ignoring that one sister is responsible for some aspects of hosting an honored guest? Who is the sister we ought to model? These questions have likely motivated a sermon in your congregation. For the purposes of this study, however, we will examine these texts from another lens: What can these short stories tell us about the relationships between these three siblings? Rather than trying to figure out who is right (How many of us have been in the position of judge or jury in our families?), we will look at how these siblings interacted with one another and what tensions were present.

In Luke's account, we feel the tension that rising between these two sisters. We miss the presence of their brother, Lazarus, entirely. Since Jesus is welcomed into Martha's house, we can imagine that she is a woman of some means—perhaps a widow. She dutifully acts as host, preparing dinner and managing the tasks of caring for a large group, while Mary, her sister, sits at the feet of Jesus to listen to him speak. In John's gospel, Mary doesn't just sit at the feet of Jesus but anoints his feet with costly perfume and wipes them with her hair. Martha barely receives a mention, and the tension between the sisters fades to the background.

## Share aloud or reflect:

5. What do you notice about the differences between these two passages?
6. What stands out about the siblings in each passage?

📖 **Read:** John 11:1-44

Let's move back one chapter in John's gospel, to encounter these siblings before they shared that evening meal in their home. This passage, commonly

called the Raising of Lazarus, is likely familiar to many who have attended church over the years. Here, Martha takes center stage as she and her sister grieve the death of their brother, Lazarus. This passage is rich in faithful confessions, powerful miracles and liberation from the powers of death.

But what is actually happening between the sisters? They send a message to Jesus while he is in Bethany, alerting him that “he whom you love is ill” (John 11:3). Jesus does not rush to their side, and we can imagine these two sisters growing in their anxiety and disappointment, the sicker Lazarus gets, and the longer Jesus stays away. We can imagine the two of them at Lazarus’ bedside, as many of us have found ourselves in hospital waiting rooms, holding the hands of loved ones as we pray.

When Jesus finally does arrive, it is Martha, not Mary who rushes to meet him with her cry that if he had come earlier, her brother would not have died. It is Martha who returns home and gathers Mary to tell her that Jesus is calling for her. As they gather together with Jesus, it is the collective grief of these two sisters along with all who have come to their side that moves Jesus to weep with them. Rather than being at odds, Mary and Martha are joined together in their sadness, holding on to one another and speaking to Jesus in the same way: “If you had been here, our brother would not have died.” Mary and Martha are still together when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. They are together when they are commanded to unbind Lazarus from his burial clothes. One might wonder if this story is not just about the miracle of the raising of Lazarus, but the binding together of these siblings, who found each other in their grief and were able to speak their deepest hurts and hopes, because they were not alone.

**Share aloud or reflect:**

7. What kinds of feelings were you able to share in your family of origin?

8. Do you remember stories of collective grief or joy?

**IT IS ALL IN THE FAMILY**

Families are complex systems. Thinking about families as systems—where all people have impacts on all other people in the family—central to family systems theory. Family systems theory is a popular way to train ministry leaders to understand the complex structures of churches, families and groups. As with any psychological theory, it has limitations. However, it helps us understand how we might think about our own families and how they have shaped us.

Murray Bowen, a psychiatrist, began studying families in the 1950s. At the time, Bowen’s work was revolutionary, because he moved away from thinking about problems as centered in the individual, to thinking about problems as existing within the dynamic whole of a family. When I was a PhD student, my advisor would often teach students to think about their families as being like a blown-up balloon. Imagine holding a balloon in your hands. Now imagine that each member of a family or a group takes up a separate pocket of air within the balloon. If something from the outside pushes against the balloon, the entire shape is forced to change. Pressure on the top might lead the balloon to bulge toward the bottom. Pressure on one side might cause the balloon to grow toward the other. If we think about our families this way, we can picture how, when stress and conflict create pressure on one part of our family, the entire system has to shift.

Take for example, the story of Jacob and Esau. The impending death of Isaac pushes this family into an acute crisis. Reactivity is an almost natural response. Big changes to a family, like a death, illness or shift in generational leadership, often cause large reactions within parts of the family. Rebekah responded to Isaac’s illness with a plot to move her youngest son into leadership. No one is

sitting down with Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob and Esau to wonder how they are all feeling about the transition in generational leadership. Each plays a part in responding to the knowledge that great change is coming to their family, and we can recognize that they make thoughtless and rash decisions.

Bowen believed that a key process to maintaining health in our family systems was to learn to be self-differentiated. Even as anxiety or difficulties arise within the system, with work, individual members could learn to respond calmly and non-reactively. At times, this doesn't happen easily, but with help, families facing crises or long-term patterns of anxiety and tension could learn to manage these ways of being together. As individuals within the system, they could also work on their own responses. The key for Bowen was to find a balance between being separate and connected, so that all people in a family could learn to tolerate the feelings that come from being too emotionally close or too distant from one another.

#### **FAMILIES MATTER**

We can gather, from the biblical texts and from Bowen, that family systems are intensely complex, just as each person within a family system is complex. Families involve a complicated web of people tied to one another, at times acting in ways they might not fully understand because of how these systems push on us unconsciously. We all play a part, whether we find ourselves with a named identity like Jacob the trickster, or we act within our familial role like Rebekah the doting mother. Because family systems remember us, trying to change within a family can often be quite difficult.

A regular complaint from people who return home for the holidays is that they end up feeling as if they have suddenly been transported back to their adolescence. Even if they've been working on new ways of growing and changing, people often say it feels as though everyone expects them to act like they

always have. Worst of all, despite their best efforts, they also find themselves doing what they have always done!

#### **Share aloud or reflect:**

9. Is there a role you play in your family (the strong one, the frazzled one, the planner, the jokester, etc)?
10. Do you ever play that same role elsewhere? Have you ever tried to change?

As we consider our families, it can be helpful to remember that families are also powerful actors in helping us learn positive, healing lessons about ourselves and others. Though change is difficult, and all systems tend to resist significant change, we can draw on stories of biblical families to help us recognize the ways that our families also support our development and growth.

#### **CLOSING PRAYER**

Triune God, whose will it is that humans live in community, bless family life everywhere and fill all homes with respect, joy, laughter and prayer ... Empower all family members to live in your grace and forgiveness, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (ELW, p. 83)

#### **CLOSING HYMN**

“Let Us Go Now to the Banquet” ELW 523 