

*Where You Are From*  
A Sermon on 2 Corinthians 11 and 12 by the Rev. Philip Major  
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When I was a school teacher, one of my challenges was finding the best ways to help my students, eight and nine year olds, who were living in unhealthy families. One child slept in the backseat of the car at the factory while his mother worked third shift. Another child endured sexual abuse. Several students had parents who abused alcohol or other drugs. One of my students had an extremely controlling father. The father was a highly educated, high-functioning professional man. The child was so fearful of his father that he slept with a hatchet underneath his bed.

In unhealthy families it is not safe for children, women and men to express their needs or their feelings. In unhealthy families it is not safe for people to tell the truth, so lots of secrets are kept and lots of lies are told.

There are no perfect families, but there are many healthy families. While many families fall into a sort of grey, in-between zone, there are a series of ‘either-or’ questions that point to whether a family is healthy or not. Healthy families are emotionally expressive. Unhealthy families are emotionally driven. Healthy families are intentional. Unhealthy families are reactive. Healthy families are relationships of trust. Unhealthy families are relationships of defensiveness and aggression. Healthy families have flexible boundaries. Unhealthy families have rigid boundaries. In healthy families people take responsibility for their actions. In unhealthy families people blame others for their actions.

Health professionals use a technical term to describe emotionally healthy adults: they are ‘self-differentiated’. Self-differentiated adults respect others and they have self-respect. Self-differentiated adults are self-directed and are aware of their feelings and thoughts, yet they are also emotionally open and work to remain connected with others.

Many of us come to a point in our lives when we realize we are in the middle of some unhealthy family relationships. For each of us, in order to live better, fuller lives, we have to practice and get better at being self-differentiated. This is the goal of all good therapy: for each person to become more self-directed, more aware of their own feelings and more emotionally open and connected with others.

Christ Jesus gives us a powerful example of self-differentiation in the story of the Last Supper. We read this passage from the Gospel of John each year on Maundy Thursday: *And during supper Jesus, knowing..that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself.* Then Jesus washed the disciples feet.

Jesus is aware of who he is and where he is going. He has respect for others but is not defined by others. Jesus is not reactive, he is intentional. Jesus is emotionally open and works to be connected with others. Jesus is our example of self-differentiation. Jesus enters many social groups and family systems, and many of them show signs of stress and lack of health. As a self-differentiated leader, he is able to coax the family or the social group towards greater health. Jesus rarely becomes entangled in defensive, aggressive or reactive relationships.

Jesus was called the Son of God and the Son of Man. St. Paul was not. St. Paul was a brilliant thinker and writer. St. Paul gave us a detailed, human perspective of what it looks like to follow the way of Christ. But St. Paul was often entangled in unhealthy group dynamics.

Our passage from 2 Corinthians is our most vivid window into Paul’s struggle with unhealthy group dynamics. Paul’s entangled relationship with the congregation in Corinth helps us reflect on the challenges we might face in our families and in our congregation. Before we consider the passage in detail, let’s consider the broader context.

It is likely Paul preached and played a part in organizing the congregation in Corinth about 17 years after the events of Easter. After a year or two, Paul moved on to other places, but he stayed in contact with the congregation through letters. Some of the members wrote to Paul, and Paul wrote back to them. We can imagine there were many letters going back and forth. Paul also visited Corinth at least once after his initial departure. When we study the letters in detail, we come to the conclusion that there had to be at least five letters to the Corinthians, but some of these have been lost. The passage we are reading today likely comes from one of the later letters to the Corinthians.

Each of Paul’s letters is unique. Each one carries a powerful message, though there are sometimes layers of words and cultural differences that make Paul’s message less than obvious to us. 2nd Corinthians can be more difficult to follow than some of Paul’s other letters, and is likely a combination of two letters, with the second letter beginning at chapter nine.

In these last five chapters of 2nd Corinthians Paul makes a powerful argument, but he is clearly exasperated with some of the members of the congregation. After he left Corinth other traveling preachers came to town. We know one of these was named Apollos, because Paul refers to him in 1st Corinthians. After Apollos left other preachers came to Corinth. Paul refers to some of these preachers as the ‘Super-Apostles’. The Super Apostles boast of their spiritual and personal superiority.

Some of the members of the congregation are quite taken in by the charisma and brilliance of the Super-Apostles. Paul sees they are being led astray. Paul sees through the brilliance and polish of the Super-Apostles. They aren’t preaching the grace-oriented, good news of Christ. Like television preachers of our own time, the Super-Apostles were polished narcissistic performers, establishing themselves in the center of a hero cult.

It is difficult to persuade people to see the false, self-centered reality of a leader who portrays himself as the confident hero. We all carry feelings of fear, anxiety and anger. This makes us susceptible to deceptive, emotionally driven words of telegenic performers who manipulate our feelings. This is the trap the Corinthians have fallen into. They have swallowed, hook, line and sinker, the self-confident, self-centered message of the Super-Apostles.

If you have ever lost your temper or found yourself tongue tied when trying to persuade a friend or relative to not get entangled in a religious or political cult, you will understand the frustration behind Paul’s words in chapters 11 and 12 of 2nd Corinthians. Paul is attempting to intervene in the situation in Corinth, which has become quite a tangle of unhealthy relationships. Paul’s words are bitter, and dripping with irony.

Though it may sound like Paul is boasting in this passage, he is attempting to respond to the boasting and the criticisms the Super-Apostles are directing at Paul, the founder of the church in Corinth. Paul IS sounding like a madman, yet Paul’s message conveys an essential idea of the Gospel. The Good News of Christ is that our salvation is not the result of our strengths or accomplishments. Our salvation is the result of God’s love for us. This is called grace. We are weak. God’s love is all the strength we need. We only need to acknowledge our weakness and turn toward God’s love. This is how we are saved. As a result there is one common game Christians never play: the boasting game.

I’m drawing our attention to Paul’s struggle with the Corinthians because we often find ourselves entangled in the same kinds of struggles in our families and in the church. This is especially true during times of uncertainty and stress. We continue to be in a time of uncertainty and stress. As families, and as a church we are facing new and unexpected challenges. Each of us has suffered from an extended time of disruption, stress and uncertainty. Some of our relationships and groups have fallen apart or been weakened by months of separation. We want things to return to normal. Very few things are returning to the way they existed before the start of the pandemic, and the pandemic is not really over.

One year ago, every sermon I delivered was a variation on a single theme: take care of yourself and take care of one another. As we negotiate a new time of change and uncertainty, I am preaching an expansion on that message. Become a student of living in a healthy way. I’m not really talking about becoming a person who goes to the gym every day. I’m concerned about your spiritual and emotional health. Your physical health contributes to your spiritual and emotional health, but your physical health is secondary.

I want to encourage you to study and learn and practice living healthfully as a person created in the image of God. Living your life as one created in the image of God is about being reflective and self-aware. This is the lesson we learn from Jesus. We learn the opposite side of that same lesson from Paul.

Paul gives us a vivid example of what happens when we are not self-aware or reflective. A lack of self-awareness leads us to be reactive, defensive, aggressive, rigid, to blame others, and to cut off others in an attempt to maintain a sense of self. These can only lead us to some form of madness.

If we are serious about taking care of ourselves and one another we will follow the example of Christ Jesus. *During the last supper Jesus, knowing..that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and he got to work.* Jesus calls us to follow his example of self-awareness. Jesus calls us to be emotionally responsive, to be connected with one another, with respect for each person and respect for our selves. Jesus calls us to be intentional. Jesus calls us to act in trustworthy ways and to build mutual, trusting relationships.

At the last supper Jesus started with the knowledge that he had come from God and was going to God. Then he got to work. I urge you to do the same. Start the day with the knowledge that you have come from God and that you are going to God. Then get to work.