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**A HEALING STORY:  
A FAMILY SYSTEMS VIEW OF THE INTERTWINING OF FAMILY STORIES  
WITH THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVE**

by

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**Bachelor of Arts, Waterloo Lutheran University, 1968  
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**THESIS**

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Master of Theology in Pastoral Counselling**

**1999**

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## ABSTRACT

God's covenant with Abraham embodied a promise of a great family beginning with a son being born to Sarah in her old age. Abraham is considered a man of great faith. What drove Abraham's faith? Was it an altruistic desire to serve God or was it a strong desire to have a family or an intertwining of both? This thesis proposes to examine how emotional family process shapes our faith and how faith development shapes our "families".

Every family has a story to tell. In the introduction I share my family story. The focus of chapter one is how God's story is intertwined with the story of the human family through the promise of God's covenant. Chapter two illustrates how the implicit story, the family emotional process, interferes with the explicit story of the church, the Gospel. Chapter three reviews Murray Bowen's theory of family systems. Edwin Friedman and Peter Steinke have applied Bowen theory to the congregational family. The results of their work is reflected upon. Chapter four explores ways to intertwine the explicit story of the church and the implicit story of the family emotional process in a more life enhancing manner by reconsidering the way we do our rituals and tell our stories.

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## Introduction

**"For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost" ( Lk. 19:10)**

What attracts people to the church family? Do people join a church or become actively involved because they seek to develop their spirituality and understanding of God or have a burning desire to serve others? On the surface that may be the reasons given but underneath I suspect that becoming actively involved in church life is far more complicated than that.

When I examine my own "spiritual" journey I know that I was curious to know exactly what the scriptures said but the real driving force behind this quest was deeply emotional.

My life journey began in 1943. I was the fifth and final child to be born to my parents. I had three older sisters and one older brother. When I was ten my grandfather came to live with us. I was the "lost" child in the family. My father had expended his attention and money on my older brother, buying him a ham radio, building him a ham shack and encouraging him into this new field of radio and television electronics. My mother spent a lot of her time and energy fussing over my three older sisters. I did not think of myself as neglected. I thought of it as freedom. I could stay out later at night than all my friends. I played on the railroad tracks and under the railway bridge and my parents didn't seem to mind. I failed grade one not because I couldn't learn but because my parents allowed me to stay up and watch the late show on television night after night. I was just plain sleepy at school. By the time I was eleven, I could have used some encouragement. The way I got attention was by becoming a super chore doer. I washed floors, painted the house, sawed wood, dug the garden, cooked meals. I also became an errand boy not only for my parents but also for my older siblings. I was mom's little helper and neighbours would say that someday I would make a good wife for some woman.



I did not like to go to church. Many Sunday mornings my mother would iron my father's white shirt and dust off his suit but he would always stay in bed until it was too late. My mother who has a strong church background would take my sister closest to me in age and myself to church. Often the struggle to attend church was too great so my mother put the radio on loud and we heard church in every room of the house.

During my mid teens we got a new pastor. He was interested in youth. He got us together at a special youth supper and made plans for us to get together on a regular basis. It made me feel terrific that this pastor seemed to care about me as a person. I enjoyed playing sports with the youth group as well as the parties and dances. I felt a strong attraction to some of the girls in our group. I attended adult confirmation because I had missed out on the regular confirmation. I began teaching Sunday School. The pastor gave me a key to the church so that I could have a quiet place to study when things were rough at home. Not only was I actively involved in church but I now drove my mother to church and choir practice every week.

I realize now that I became involved in church because the pastor and some other adults paid attention to me. They made me feel valued and I needed that desperately having come from a home where I felt I was of very little value. Of course, I was not conscious of all this going on. I just knew it felt good to be accepted and appreciated. It should have been no surprise that while listening to our pastor preach about how Jesus called the disciples even though they had their problems, my body actually trembled when out of the blue I felt called to the ministry.

What is it that attracts people to the church family and what is it that keeps them there? The purpose of this thesis is to examine the way our family stories or personal stories (emotional family process material) intertwines with the Bible stories and in particular the Gospel stories to bring healing to our pain. The conclusion of this thesis is that there is great power for healing when these stories are intertwined in a manner that reframes the story of our family emotional process and at the same time deepens our understanding of God's story of salvation. This is seen in story of Joseph.

Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, 'say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." But Joseph said to them, Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them. (Genesis 50:15-21).

This story of Joseph and his family is an example where faith was the ultimate shaper of the family process. In spite of having been sold into slavery by his brothers, who were so jealous of their father's favouritism toward Joseph that they wanted him dead, he remained faithful to his God along a path of many ups and downs. Joseph's faith allowed him to see what had happened in a different way. "Even though you intended to do harm, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today" (Genesis 50:20). When Joseph intertwines his faith story with the sorry tale of his brothers' powerful healing of family pain, hurt and misunderstanding takes place. Joseph could have intertwined his faith story in an unhealthy way by believing that God had given him this position of power over his brothers in order to be

an instrument of God's judgment on them. Intertwining his faith story in a healthy manner, Joseph is able to reframe his family story in a way that reveals God's grace and brings blessings to Joseph and his family.

The Gospel story of the Wedding Feast at Cana reveals how a family story (a family emotional process) intertwines with a faith story. Jesus, his mother, and his disciples were in Cana of Galilee attending a wedding. "When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, 'They have no wine'. And Jesus said to her, 'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me ? My hour has not yet come'. His mother said to the servants, 'Do whatever he tells you'. (John 2:3-5 ). This conversation between Jesus and his mother is very revealing of the family emotional process. Jesus' mother, typical of mothers, knows Jesus better than he appears to know himself at the time. That's the family story, a mother instructing her son, encouraging him to do something he appears hesitant to do. This is something that parents do. When this family story intertwines with Jesus' faith story that is only beginning to unfold, a miracle occurs, the water becomes wine. "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory, and his disciples believed in him" (John 2:11). Although the disciples "believed in him" and had begun to intertwine their stories with the story of Jesus, we see that their thinking had not yet been transformed. They were not able to reframe their life stories which included all the things they had learned in their family emotional process. James and John fought over who would be first. Peter objected when Jesus said that he had to go to Jerusalem to die. It was not until Jesus appeared to them after his resurrection that their intertwined faith stories were reframed in a manner that allowed the power of the Gospel to flow through them.

## **Chapter 1: The Story of the Gospel - The Explicit Story**

**"In the beginning was the word" John 1:1**

**The story of the Gospel begins in Genesis. God spoke the word and out of chaos and darkness the world and all of its creatures were created. At the beginning of this story God gave a command to Adam and Eve. "And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die' (Genesis 3:16-17). The story which includes Adam and Eve eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is a story of the birth of consciousness. From this point on humankind would be aware that there is a Creator and that thoughts and actions have consequences. As Kushner (1996) writes:**

**I would like to suggest another way of reading the story, one that I think makes better sense of the events, leaves fewer loose ends, and paints a more positive picture of our first ancestors and by implication of us as well. We don't have to feel condemned by the story, inevitably fated to sin and lose God's love as Adam and Eve did. We can read it as inspiring, even liberating story, a story of what a wonderful, complicated, painful, and rewarding thing it is to be a human being. I would like to suggest that the story of the Garden of Eden is a tale, not of Paradise Lost but of Paradise Outgrown not of Original Sin but of the Birth of Conscience. The account of Adam and Eve eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, as I see it, is a mythical description of how the first human beings left the world of animal existence behind and entered the problematic world of being human. It is the biblical account of evolution, seeing the difference between humans and animals in moral rather than anthropological terms.( pp21-22.)**

**Subsequently the Bible unfolds as a series of stories in which God seeks a living conscious relationship with humankind. The love story of God intertwines with the stories of humankind through covenants. We see in Genesis chapter six that over the years people begin to forget God and to do wicked things. Finding Noah to be a righteous person God intertwines God's story in a covenant in which Noah and his family**

are saved from perishing in the flood in an ark. When the flood dries up the details of God's covenant are shared with Noah:

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.' God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.' God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of my covenant that I have established between me and all that is on the earth.'

(Genesis 9:8-17)

God's story will be intertwined with Noah and his descendants and all living creatures of the earth. The rainbow will be a sign of this covenant and a reminder both to God and the earth.

In Genesis chapter 17, God intertwines God's story with Abram and Sarai through another covenant. God's story is one of good news for this elderly couple who have no children. God promises them a son and many descendants. As a sign of this covenant God changes Abram's name to Abraham, and Sarai's name to Sarah. In the following chapters of Genesis we hear the stories of Abraham and Sarah and their family of descendants, stories that display human weakness but are nevertheless intertwined with God's story of love for all the world.

There are many colourful family stories that intertwine with faith stories throughout the Book of Genesis. Eventually, the Israelites find themselves in Egypt working as slaves but prospering and multiplying under a benevolent Pharaoh. When a

**new family comes to power in Egypt the new Pharaoh does not know Joseph's family and he fears the multitude of Israelites. This Pharaoh devises a plan to oppress the Israelites. The Egyptians became hard taskmasters and the Israelites began to suffer greatly. In their severe hardship they cried out to God, "God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Exodus 29:24). God remembers God's covenant with the Israelites:**

**Say therefore to the Israelites, I am the Lord and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgement. I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; I will give it to you for a possession. I am the Lord. (Exodus 6:6-8)**

**God's good news, the story of the promise of redemption (freedom from slavery), is intertwined with the story of the suffering of the children of Israel in the renewal of this old covenant. God delivered the Israelites and Moses led them in the wilderness for forty years where God forged this covenant relationship with them. The children of Israel receive not only freedom from slavery but also a corporate family identity which could foreshadow the Christian Church:**

**Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites. (Exodus 19:5-6)**

**The children of Israel were in the habit of becoming involved with the other peoples who lived in the land with them. Too frequently the Israelites would intertwine their stories with the stories of these foreign people and this would lead to covenants with them and their gods. On Mount Sinai God etched into the consciousness of the Israelites the words of the covenant - The Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments lay the groundwork for the intertwining of God's stories and the**

people's stories. It also sets the boundaries for the intertwining of the people's stories in their life together as God's children. Time and again the people break their covenant with God and become involved with lesser gods and foreign gods, but God reaches out again and again to bring them back into God's family. God uses priests, prophets, kings, and even foreign kings to renew the covenant with them. The book of Isaiah contains the most beautiful and unique poetry in the Old Testament. Second Isaiah wrote during the Israelites' return from exile in Babylon. Isaiah intertwines God's message of judgement and salvation with the stories of the people's sins and falling away from their covenant relationship with God. Isaiah whose name means "the Lord saves" brings meaning to the political disasters of the people and the promise of restoration of Israel as God's servant nation and light of the world.

Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the Lord, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth, I tell you of them.

(Isaiah 42:5-9)

Isaiah in an artful and powerful fashion intertwines God's vision of salvation with the stories of the people at their most hopeless and darkest hour.

The prophet Jeremiah proclaimed God's message of judgement and the call to repentance. By intertwining God's story with the people's stories Jeremiah emphasized that God cared greatly about individuals and their accountability.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant of our ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt - a covenant that

they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

(Jeremiah 31:31-34)

When we turn to the New Testament we find that Matthew begins his Gospel by intertwining the story of Jesus the Messiah with the human story by placing Jesus in Abraham's family tree. Joseph finding Mary pregnant before they lived together then having an angel appear to him in a dream is a marvelous example of God's story intertwining with the human story. The visit of the wise men expands God's story further into the human community. All four Gospels are abundantly overflowing with these wonderful stories of God intermingling with the people. Undergirding all these stories is God's enduring covenant with the people.

While they were eating Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to his disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will never again drink of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."

(Matthew 26:26-29)

Just as the celebration of Passover had become the story of God's covenant remembered for the Jews, now the celebration of the Lord's Supper had become the story of God's covenant of grace where the people's stories of sin and disappointment were intertwined with God's love and forgiveness. Christ is the spokesperson - the storyteller and also the story. Holy Communion is the way the church remembers and celebrates the story of God's covenant. In Holy Baptism the church acknowledges and celebrates this covenant relationship with God.



**In Holy Baptism our gracious heavenly Father liberates us from sin and death by joining us to death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are born children of a fallen humanity; in the waters of Baptism we are reborn children of God and inheritors of eternal life. By water and the Holy Spirit we are made members of the Church which is the body of Christ. As we live with him and with his people, we grow in faith, love, and obedience to the will of God.**

**(Lutheran Book of Worship, p.121)**

**So Baptism is the sacrament where the baptized person's life story becomes intertwined with the story of God's covenant. God's enduring covenant relationship with the people is the basis of the explicit story of the church and congregation. Just as the children of Israel would distort, confuse, or abandon their covenantal relationship with God so too has the Christian church.**

**To assist in keeping the church's explicit story, the Gospel, true to the revelation in scripture, the early church fathers authored three creeds - the Athanasian, the Nicene, and the Apostle's Creed. The Apostle's Creed evolved earlier than the canonization of the Scriptures. These creeds are short summaries of God's story. They say that God is a Trinity, three identities in one. God the Father is the Creator of heaven and earth, God incarnate is the Son, Jesus Christ, the redeemer of the world, and God the Holy Spirit is the sanctifier.**

**The cross of Christ is the centre of the explicit story of the Christian church. Through God's full participation in the world in the suffering Christ we have the opportunity of being changed from within.**

**Through worship, Christian education, and evangelical outreach the church holds up the explicit story of the Gospel where everyone is invited to intertwine their life stories with God's covenantal story of grace. This intertwining has awakened conscience, caused stretching and growth in attitude, and moved people to care for others. In spite of her shortcomings, the church has been and continues to be "a light unto the nations", by encouraging missionary and charitable work, fostering and supporting pastoral**

counselling centres, and continuing to be involved in education. The main centre where the intertwining of the explicit Gospel and resultant caring attitude takes place is the local congregation.

## Chapter 2 The Implicit Story

**"The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach".**

**(Matthew 23:2-3)**

**One of the realities of life is that when a light shines it reveals shadows or places of darkness. The church with her Gospel of light has its shadows.**

### **The Church of the Smile.**

**Down in the valley of a busy little town there was a church. It was not a really big church but then it was not little either. It was medium in size. When visitors came to worship at this church they were always impressed because the people smiled and seemed so friendly. Impressive too was the activity of this medium-sized congregation. Every committee was functioning: worship, learning, witness, stewardship, youth, service, and property. This congregation was also supporting the neighborhood food bank and world missions. The Church of the Smile was the envy of other larger but less busy congregations. The Church of the Smile had a couple of problems. First, in spite of its expressed desire to grow and all of its activities it did not grow. New members would come in the front door and in a little while would leave through the back door. The second problem was keeping pastors. Pastors would come all enthused about the Church of the Smile but in a few short years they would leave discouraged. The explicit story, the Gospel, was proclaimed and professed. The Sunday School was active and well attended and adult Bible studies were popular, at least among the core group. Could the problem be in the implicit family stories?**

**A new pastor came to serve in the Church of the Smile. At first it was fun to be so busy. She felt needed and appreciated. With all the things going on: youth group, food bank, committees, bazaars, social night, cards for seniors, bus trips, not to mention**

worship, weddings, baptisms, and funerals it felt like ministry was really happening. The pastor gave up personal and family time to give an extra effort to make the congregation grow. Time and again the pastor would cultivate new members but in a short time these new members would mysteriously drop out. The pastor was growing weary from seeing her extra effort disappear into nothingness. The pastor believed that when things were running smoothly she would get a chance to tend to her own life and family. But the strangest thing was, just when congregational life seemed to be functioning well and on the upswing a crisis would break out, just like clock work.

Take the youth group, for example. The chairperson of the youth committee although a young married woman, just could not seem to get the youth group functioning no matter how hard she tried. When the new pastor came, a man who had two teenagers himself volunteered to take over the youth group. Being a manager by profession he got on the phone, talked to teens and their parents, convinced some other parents to help him and, lo and behold, he brought together one of the best youth groups in years. The former chairperson seemed pleased to be on the youth committee. They planned and had their first retreat. What an amazing weekend! The pastor led discussions on peer pressure and Christian values and time had to be extended because the youth did not want to stop discussing! Joy and enthusiasm could be felt in the worship, workshops, fun, and fellowship of the retreat. The Church of the Smile was smiling! Then there was the phone call. "Pastor you had better speak to the former youth chairperson or we are all going to quit leading the youth group". How could one gentle person stir up such anger? Upon visiting, the pastor discovered that the former youth chairperson had expressed her concern that there was not enough religious content in the youth meetings. The pastor explained that there was good solid discussion about the struggles of faith at the retreat. The former youth chairperson seemed calm and reasonable. There was apparently no problem here.

The pastor attended the next youth committee meeting. The topic of religious content was discussed quite calmly and there was a consensus that this would always be the underlying theme of youth activities. When the others had left the meeting the pastor asked the chairperson if he was satisfied with the discussion because she noticed his neck getting red and blotchy. He answered that he was fine and glad to have a chance to clarify the situation. For now, at least, a crisis had been averted. The youth committee was still intact but where was the anger coming from and where did it go? The youth group functioned well for several years until most of the teens went away to university or started working.

Because of his managerial experience this second chairperson of the youth committee now volunteered to be the chairperson of the mutual ministry committee. In previous years the mutual ministry committee had voted to give the pastor a 3% or 4% merit bonus based on their evaluation of her work. This year the pastor was surprised when the mutual ministry committee followed the recommendation of the chairperson and voted for a one and one half percent merit bonus. What was the reason for such a low bonus this year? Apparently, one person could not reach the pastor on the phone for a couple of hours one evening to report the death of a member. This pastor had often worked on her day off. How could one phone call be interpreted that the pastor was not available? Could there be some unresolved anger being recycled here?

When the next annual meeting came no one was willing to be council president except the young woman who had been the former youth chairperson. The pastor wondered how such a quiet gentle person could handle such a role. For several months she did an admirable job conducting council business. But there was a problem. Attendance and offerings were down. What had happened? The quiet, gentle chairperson called a special council meeting to find out what was happening. She came to the meeting with charts she had created which showed how attendance had been dropping off ever since the new pastor had arrived, except for the year that the pastor

had made a special effort to cultivate new members. This rise in membership and attendance was not attributed to the pastor's work but to a lay volunteer who helped with the visiting. Another council person saw that the charts were faulty. The downward trend had started two pastors ago and in fact under the present pastor the decline had slowed and reversed for a time. In her anxiety over what appeared to be an attack on her ministry the pastor forgot to mention that as a result of a falling out of the council chairperson's inlaws with another family, that family had left the congregation and several other families who were close to the family withdrew from being active in the congregation. When the members of the youth group left for university and the workplace their parents became less active in the church as well. Why had the council chairperson gone to such great lengths to make the pastor look responsible for a low cycle of congregational life? Why was the total picture ignored? A short time afterward the pastor resigned. As she was making her farewell visits the underlying stories began to unfold.

The really fascinating story concerned the council chairperson's relatives. The grandmother and grandfather of this family had been among the original group of people who had decided to organize this Church of the Smile. They had both served in many different ways over the years. The family that left the congregation, after having had a falling out with this charter family, stated that they had always thought of this grandmother and grandfather as their substitute parents since they themselves both came from abusive alcoholic parents with whom they had very little contact. For this charter family the Church of the Smile may have been a much more peaceful and balanced home than their own. Grandmother and grandfather's marital relationship was filled with anger, tension, and anxiety. Grandmother and grandfather in their religiosity were in denial about this for many years while their children acted out and had troubled relationships. It seemed as if this family became over involved in church work in order to avoid facing the pain in their nuclear family. Over the years this family came to dominate

the decision making process often indirectly. The majority of the members of the Church of the Smile were "nice" people and over the years they had been kept in their place by the anger embodied in this one charter family that had become an extended family. That is partly the reason the Church of the Smile would not grow. When new members were elected to positions of leadership they would often find themselves frustrated because their new ideas would be severely criticized or sabotaged. Eventually discouraged, they would resign and leave the church but they would not tell their stories to the pastor until the pastor was leaving.

The curious thing about the Church of the Smile is that to a visitor it appeared that this congregation was motivated and guided by the explicit story of the Gospel. In reality, however, it was the implicit story of one family's secret pain, anger, and anxiety and the other families' acceptance of this emotionally intimidating anger and anxiety that shaped the life of this congregation. Certainly the other families had their stories that contributed to the personality of the Church of the Smile. The implicit family stories are bound to influence the congregation. Sometimes people join a congregation because they are seeking meaning for their lives. Sometimes parents hope that the church will help them teach their children values. Oftentimes people will drop out of church when they are having problems such as marital strife, divorce or separation, job loss, serious illness, alcoholism and others. Perhaps it says something about the implicit story of the church when people in trouble decide that it is too risky to look for understanding and care at church. I believe the problem is centered in our inability to intertwine our implicit family stories with the explicit Gospel story in a meaningful way.

### Chapter 3: Selected Literature Review

**"As will be seen, family trees are always trees of knowledge and often they are also trees of life." (Friedman, p. 32)**

The world in which I grew up is referred to as the modern era. It was the latter part of the industrial age, the forties to the seventies. The world and people's lives were viewed through a particular paradigm. In that paradigm reality is material, reality is stuff. What you see is what you get. This period was the height of the machine age. Machines did work. Machines functioned well and became so important to our way of life that people began to think of themselves as machines. The human body was thought of as a machine. Feed it better fuel and it could work faster and produce more. If a heart or lung wore out it could be replaced like the part of a machine. Much work went into inventing a mechanical heart and lungs. Things were viewed as isolated, separate from each other. Things could be known objectively. The scientific method was held up as pure where subjectivity was eliminated. Through this scientific viewpoint things were predictable; for every effect there was a cause. The way to understand things was to dissect, to take them apart and analyze. If something malfunctioned the procedure was to isolate the problem and fix it. This same way of thinking carried over into human problems. If a member of a family displayed an emotional problem that could not be fixed in the family, then the problem family member was isolated in a mental institution. Often the form of treatment was electric shock or chemicals assuming the problem could be isolated in the brain of the troubled person or in the blood chemistry. This method is still used extensively. Some psychiatrists and clinicians were beginning to recognize that the paradigm through which they viewed and treated their patients was incomplete. They discovered that some patients when institutionalized became symptom free but when they returned to the family home the symptoms returned. The psychiatrists and clinicians were beginning to realize that



mental health was much more complex than cause and effect. At the same time scientists were beginning to discover that the food chain and our environment were also interrelated and complex. These discoveries led to what we now call quantum thinking. The quantum thinking paradigm understands reality as energy in relationship and therefore not easily predictable if at all. Things are viewed as living organisms. Knowing requires involvement. Causes are complex. Understanding requires comprehension of the whole. Problem solving requires figuring out complex situations. The solution is more in seeking adaptation or modification than in finding an absolute fix.

Although it was not called quantum thinking, in the field of family therapy Murray Bowen originated a new paradigm for understanding families called family systems theory or Bowen theory. Through his work at the Menninger Foundation and the National Institute of Mental Health, Bowen observed that the family functioned as an emotional unit through a network of interlocking relationships. Other psychological theories focused on the individual. Each member in a family would function as an individual motivated by his or her own internal psychological mechanisms and conflicts. In family systems theory the network of interlocking relationships are assumed to be governed by the same counterbalancing life forces that operate in all natural systems and have an enormous impact on the thinking, feelings and behaviour of each family member. The family relationship system strongly influenced each individual in the family. The psychology of the individual is still recognized in family systems theory but it is considered in the larger context of emotional relationship patterns. (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, pp. viii-ix)

The importance of family systems theory is that it sets out new variables that help in understanding how physical diseases, emotional illnesses and social acting-out problems are triggered and influenced and it provides a way of understanding the interrelationship of these newly defined variables. From his observations Bowen concluded that the family emotional system was a naturally occurring system, just as the

solar system, the bee colony, and the cell. In the evolutionary process the family emotional system evolved. It is part of nature for us to discover. It has a tremendous influence in our life stories and it plays a major role in our struggle for that deeper consciousness begun in Eden. Bowen describes it this way:

One important purpose is establishing as a cornerstone of family systems theory the assumption that the behavior of all forms of life is driven and regulated by the same fundamental "life forces". The human, by virtue of possessing an emotional system akin to what exists in all life, has major portions of his behavior governed by processes that predate the development of his complex cerebral cortex. While humans are quick to provide "reasons" for their actions and inactions, much of what they do is done by other forms of life unencumbered by such "reasons". Humans are attracted to one another, mate, reproduce, rear young, help one another, compete, fight, flee, dominate one another, prey on other life, etc. We mate in the name of "love", fight in the name of some "ideal", help one another in the name of "virtue", and rear young in the name of "responsibility". It appears from watching other animals in nature, however, that we might do many of these things irrespective of any stated reason. This viewpoint does not negate the influence of the human's higher brain centers on his behavior; it simply emphasizes the importance of the substrate on which the activity of higher brain centers rests. (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p.28)

Bowen theory speaks not only to the behaviour of the individual but also to the relationship system. One of the concepts of Bowen theory is the individuality-togetherness continuum. Individuality and togetherness appear to be the result of counterbalancing "life forces". To propose that life forces exist that govern our relationships is a major theoretical step beyond the paradigm of describing interactions between individuals as a series of actions and reactions. The discovery of a gravitational field changed our understanding of how planets were controlled in their orbits in the solar system. Similarly, the postulation of the concept of counterbalancing life forces shifts the centre of influence of animal behaviour from the individual to the relationship system. Viewed in this way the health and/or dysfunction of an individual bears a significant relationship to the balance or imbalance of individuality and togetherness in a relationship system. (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p.59) In an emotionally

significant relationship the life forces of togetherness - individuality constantly strive for balance.

A factor that plays a major role in the togetherness-individuality balance is the differentiation of self. Individuality refers to a life force while differentiation refers to the process by which individuality and togetherness are managed by a person. Within a relationship system a person with a higher level of differentiation will demonstrate stronger individuality. Differentiation and individuality are often used synonymously but it is important to note that higher levels of differentiation allow a person to give a free rein to togetherness urges. In fact, the essence of the concept of differentiation is the ability to be in emotional contact with others yet still be autonomous in one's emotional functioning. Bowen developed a scale of differentiation. The average person rates about 40. A well differentiated person would be in the 60 to 75 range. No one rates 100. No one is completely emotionally separate although this appears to be the problem for the psychopath. A person can develop his or her level of differentiation through self-reflection and learning (and prayer and meditation). This learning must then be manifested in a new way of acting. By this process, "defining a self", a person while in an emotionally significant relationship with others can raise his or her level of differentiation. It is important to note that this cannot occur if one avoids others (emotional cutoff), disrupts the relationship by triangling with someone else, or sabotages the relationship with emotionally provocative behaviour.

Besides differentiation of self, chronic anxiety is the other variable or process used to explain the level of functioning in family systems theory. To be alive is to experience anxiety. When people leave their families of origin they have a certain level of differentiation of self and they also have an accompanying degree of unresolved emotional attachment. The level of differentiation will have an influence on the amount of chronic anxiety and emotional reactivity that is manifested in the individual. Interestingly, people with identical levels of differentiation are attracted to one another.

When such a relationship occurs the emotional well-being of both people is enhanced and they feel calm and more secure. The life force that strives for attachment or emotional closeness also strives for distance when the relationship becomes too intense. Distance helps only temporarily. Distance may produce less anxiety in the relationship, but the relationship is less available to calm anxiety. Anxiety needs to be bound. If the main relationship does not bind anxiety it gets bound in another relationship or an activity. For example, work relationships or social relationship can provide emotional reinforcement. Such an arrangement could be considered a balanced system, albeit a grossly oversimplified one. A life event, either positive or negative, or a series of minor events, can raise the anxiety level of the relationship system and symptoms will appear. (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, pp.264-5) A change of job or a pregnancy or some other event can increase anxiety in a family emotional system. Depending on a family's level of differentiation or undifferentiation that family will either absorb the extra anxiety and reestablish an equilibrium or develop a symptom. Often one person in the family absorbs a disproportionate share of the system's anxiety and develops a physical symptom. Such a situation can be healed through a therapeutic relationship which fosters differentiation and brings balance back to the relationship. Sometimes the extended family can be helpful in managing anxiety in a nuclear family and sometimes an event in the extended family can increase the anxiety in the nuclear family.

In addition to the influence of a wide range of life events and a family's ability to adapt to those events, the level of chronic anxiety in a nuclear family is also significantly influenced by the character of a nuclear family's relationship to the extended family system. Individuals and nuclear families are cut off emotionally from their families of origin in degrees ranging from minor and insignificant to major and quite significant. People cut off from their families of origin to reduce the discomfort generated by being in emotional contact with them. Cutoff can reduce anxiety and should not be regarded as "good" or "bad". However, while people and nuclear families can reduce anxiety by cutting off, people and nuclear families can also increase anxiety by cutting off. It is "easier" not

to have to deal with people and situations one has difficulty dealing with, but by not dealing with them one also loses emotional connections that are potentially stabilizing. For most people, their family of origin is probably the most reliable support system they can ever have. So while staying away from one's family can reduce anxiety, particularly when one is not under much personal stress, loss of viable emotional contact with the family of origin can also increase anxiety, particularly when one is under personal stress. (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 271)

The way some people manage their undifferentiation is through emotional cutoff, made separate in Bowen theory to help explain the intensity of the emotional family process. Many people emotionally cut off from their family of origin to avoid the anxiety of being connected and are determined to be different from them. Sometimes they marry and develop "substitute families" or they join organizations and invest much emotion in them. Cutoff may relieve anxiety in the beginning but the person remains susceptible to intense relationships. A more intense version of the past or its mirror will be repeated in the present. In order to grow out of the emotional cutoff trap one must see oneself as part of the emotional system and be willing to change within oneself. It is a matter of recognizing emotional triggers and learning new ways to respond to them. As with differentiation no one is ever completely detached from unresolved emotional attachment to their family of origin. Being more responsible for oneself and being less responsible for the emotional functioning of others is the way to lessen the need for emotional cutoff and to grow toward a more healthy and fulfilling way of relating. This also appears to reduce a person's level of chronic anxiety.

Anxiety is also an influence in the formation of a triangle which is the basic molecule of an emotional system and also the smallest stable relationship unit. As long as the situation is calm a two person emotional relationship will remain stable. When anxiety increases either from within or from outside the two person relationship, a third person will become involved in the relationship and this will decrease the anxiety because it is now distributed over a three person relationship. One of the main concepts of family systems theory is emotional interconnectedness and therefore it is not possible

to adequately explain emotional process in one relationship if its connections to other relationships are ignored. Triangling is the term used to describe this phenomenon. Interlocking triangles become a grid of emotional pathways for the relationship process in families and groups. Family systems theory has enormous implications for understanding not only families but also other groups and especially the congregational families that make up the church.

Edwin H. Friedman in his book *Generation to Generation - Family Process in Church and Synagogue* uses family systems theory to explain the behaviour of congregations and their leaders. From his listening to religious leaders over the years he formed two conclusions. "One is that the family is the true ecumenical experience of all humankind. The second is that what most unites all spiritual leaders is not a set of beliefs or practices but the factors that contribute to our stress." (Friedman, 1985, p. 1) Stress is less the result of too much work and more the effect of our position in the triangle of our families. Friedman also noticed that all clergy are involved in three distinct families at the same time: the clergy's own family, the congregational family, and the families within the congregation. The emotional forces of these families interlock, the emotional processes of all three are identical and therefore better understanding and functioning in one has a positive influence on the others and unresolved issues in one can cause symptoms in the others.

Friedman has observed that the emotional family process (the implicit story) has the ability to pervert or disrupt spiritual values (the explicit story).

The emotional processes in a family always have the power to subvert or override its religious values. The emotional system of any family, parishioner or congregational, can always "jam" the spiritual messages it is receiving. Thus, to whatever extent we can use our unique access to families to foster emotional healing, we are always at every moment preparing the way for other, more spiritual experiences to come later. Indeed, because of this intricate connection between the emotional processes of a family and its spirituality, the family model creates a

perspective for heightening the religiosity of many occasions simply by the way we involve family members. (Friedman, 1985, pp. 6-7)

Friedman applies the family model to leadership and pastoral counselling. He says that leadership has been heading in the wrong direction since the emphasis has been on expecting the leader to be an expert in as many areas as possible. This has a disintegrating effect and is impossible because of the vast volumes of knowledge involved. This fragmentation dissipates a leader's power. From a family systems approach leaders and families are united with the forces of creation. The message pathways between the "head" and any family are embedded in the organism. Leadership then becomes a therapeutic modality where the strength of leadership rests with the clarity with which the leader defines him/herself. The more differentiated and defined the leader while still in emotional contact with the congregational family the more effective the leadership. Clergy have a unique position because of their involvement in the family stories of their parishioners. Because of the nature of the congregational family these stories are intergenerational. The pastoral dynamic of the leader is the result of the leader's family story being intertwined with the leader's faith story.

Consistent with the family model, I believe that the efficacy of the pastoral approach resides in our position in the emotional processes of our community and how we function within that position, in all aspects of our "family leadership" and not just while we are counseling. It has always seemed to me, therefore, that what makes pastoral counseling "pastoral" is whether we, the pastors, have listened to Scripture! If so, then to the extent we function and grow within the context of our own souls (a lifetime project) and abet the emergence of our own selves (by a willingness to face life's challenges and oneself), our spirituality and our tradition will spring naturally from our being. (Friedman, 1985, p. 8)

Friedman applies family systems theory as a model for pastoral counselling. When a parishioner comes with a problem, the pastoral leader listens to the story and then helps or coaches the parishioner to rewrite a new chapter in the story, taking into account all the concepts of family systems theory. Most importantly, this approach recognizes that the parishioner with the complaint is the "identified" patient or the

symptom bearer for the family in which something is askew. This approach closely resembles the way Jesus often healed those who came to him. Jesus would listen to their story ( a family story, “was he born blind because his parents sinned” John 9:1-41). and then he would offer a new chapter or tell a parable and thereby reframe the story into a healing one.

It is important to note here the distinction between intertwining and reframing. Intertwining our implicit story with the explicit story of the Gospel does not necessarily lead to health. I think this is what is implied in the parable of the sower in Matthew 13. Jesus explains the parable.

Hear then the parable of the sower. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what is sown in the heart; this is what was sown on the path. As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away. As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing. But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty. (Matthew 13:18-23)

The seed, “the word of the kingdom”, is sown on all four soil conditions. Each soil condition represents a person whose implicit story has been intertwined with the explicit story of the Gospel. Only one person is good soil and bears fruit. This is the person who understands the explicit Gospel story. When a person “understands” the explicit Gospel story, their implicit family emotional process story becomes reframed. Such a person is truly “born from above” and will bear fruit of the Spirit. The other soil conditions are people who show symptoms of family emotional process problems. The trampled down path could represent a person who has been abused and as a result his/her heart is hardened. The word of God will fall on deaf ears in this case. There are many women who cannot believe in God the Father because they were abused by their



own fathers. Is their situation hopeless? I think not. When I was a child and I dug the garden, sometimes I would dig up the hardened path. I would break up those hard lumps and rake the soil fine. Now, when planted, it would produce well. This is true for the other two conditions. I have raked up rocky ground, planted it, fertilized it, and it has produced abundantly. The same is true with thorns as a soil condition. Pull the thorns out and the seeds will grow. If we give pastoral care to these persons taking into consideration "the conditions of the soil" as a result of family emotional process, we can help prepare a place for the word of God to grow. When God's seed grows in a person, their life story becomes reframed. Human involvement in Jesus' miracles is not a new thing. Jesus told the steward to tell the servants to fill the purification jars with water. Then he turned it into wine. Jesus asked to have the stone rolled away from Lazarus' tomb before he called him back to life. Jesus asked for donations and received the five loaves and two fish and then he fed the five thousand.

Friedman observes that the extended family field, the family process over several generations, has an influence in the present. Family issues can be transmitted from generation to generation. The same story is acted out in the next generation if there are issues that are unresolved. When a family discovers their family story (often secret, hidden from consciousness in the emotional family process) the family is better able to distance itself and to change the ending of the story.

The family systems model lends itself well to the story form. Family systems theory focuses on the emotional process - the plot, the story - rather than on the content - the props and the explicit issues. Family systems theory focuses on the emotional interaction of the members of a family or group. A story or play has its life in the interaction of the characters. Similar to the family systems model, a story or play develops as more and more of the interactions and relationships are revealed. Neither the family process nor a story move in a linear fashion but rather in many directions at the same time. By changing the lines or script of one person in the play or story the

outcome in the play or story is changed. Similarly by changing the script or story of one member of a family system the whole system will be affected.

A family history is the story of the extended family field. Our uniqueness is the product of where we stand in that story and the process of our self-differentiation. Being in this extended family story determines our emotional potential and our difficulties. Our extended family story is the source of our strengths and our weaknesses. The better we understand our position the better we will be able to navigate our life gracefully and avoid running from the "ground of our being," which is our extended family field with its explicit and implicit stories.

Friedman views life-cycle ceremonies as optimum opportunities for clergy to help an extended family to bring healing to itself. At such times as weddings, funerals, rites associated with birth and puberty, as well as critical illness, divorce, retirement, and geographical uprooting, families are more open to telling their true story and to accept the intertwining of the faith story.

No other aspect of our duties so unifies our major responsibilities. At no other time do we operate so equally as priest (i.e., celebrant) and pastor. At no other time can we so effectively fulfill the pastoral part of our ministry without having to adopt modes and metaphors from outside our calling. And, at no other time are the two major dimensions of our healing potential so apparent: the uniqueness of our entree into family life, and the power inherent in our community position.

But more than healing is involved. A family approach to life-cycle events also enhances the holiness inherent in the tradition, because religious values are far more likely to be heard when family process is working toward the success of the passage, rather than against it. After all, it is hard to get the message of consecration across at a baptism, a christening, or a bris if there has been intense conflict over the name to be bestowed. Working through the family emotional issues behind such conflicts will enhance the spirituality of the occasion. (Friedman, 1985, p. 163)

In most of the stories in the Bible we see that it is true that people are more open to hear God's story when they are going through change or separation as a family, extended family, tribe, or nation. Joseph was open to a faith story as a result of the separation

crisis brought about by his brothers trying to solve their jealousy by selling him into slavery. The children of Israel were open to the faith story Moses brought to them because their living conditions had changed severely under a new pharaoh. They were in a crisis situation. The Samaritan woman at Jacob's well was open to receiving Jesus' "living water" (a faith story) because her family story had been a trail of broken relationships. Inherent in these intertwining stories is, in a sense, salvation through differentiation. Joseph probably would have died of a broken heart (spirit) if he had not been drawn in faith toward being his own self in relationship to God. By differentiating from his dysfunctional family Joseph became more emotionally whole and his creative energy was set loose. Even Potiphar's wife could not draw him into an emotional triangle. "He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except yourself, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:9) The slaves of Egypt became the children of Israel when they differentiated from the fabric of the Egyptian society by renewing their covenant faith story with God through the encouragement of Moses. Moses himself had differentiated from his Egyptian family emotional system years earlier. These are remarkable illustrations of family stories intertwining with faith stories to bring about true identity through differentiation during life crisis events.

Friedman says that in a congregation the very same emotional processes occur as in a nuclear family and an extended family. He uses the analogy of electronics. Not only are the interlocking triangles, the pathways of emotional flow wired the same, but they also run on the same voltage. This is the reason that emotional process in a family can affect the congregation and vice versa. This knowledge is vitally important when it comes to the intertwining of life stories with faith stories. Could one speculate that this is one of the reasons that Jesus was born into a human family? If salvation comes through the incarnation of God into the human family, then families need to be connected or wired in.

Peter L. Steinke in his book *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems* sets out to explain how the family emotional process manifests itself in a congregation. Steinke's goal is to make the emotional processes in a congregation more recognizable so that they can be used to serve the building up of the community through healthier functioning. He draws our attention to the metaphors we use to describe the church : the body of Christ, the New Israel, the shepherd and the flock. The church's explicit story is told in these metaphors which elicit images of warmth and caring in a group or community - a "family feeling". But there is an implicit story. Angry forces, bitterness, suspicion, deception, coercion, and rejection can be bringing their crippling forces to bear on the life of the congregation. Not all family process is negative. On the contrary, comfort, joy, support, friendship and co-operation are just a few of the positive manifestations. Emotional systems are inherently anxious. Therefore it behooves us to be aware of both the positive and negative aspects of the implicit story in order to enhance the congregation's ability to proclaim and manifest the explicit story. Steinke quotes theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer:

"There arose a reasoning among them which of them should be the greatest" (Luke 9:46). We know who it is that sows this thought in the Christian community. But perhaps we do not bear in mind enough that no Christian community ever comes together without this thought immediately emerging as a seed of discord. Thus at the very beginning of Christian fellowship there is engendered an invisible, often unconscious, life-and-death contest. "There arose a reasoning among them": This is enough to destroy a fellowship. (Steinke, 1993, pp. ix-x)

The church's explicit story carries the promise of the presence of the Holy Spirit and the power of the forgiveness of sins but these do not abolish the reality of anxiety.

Faith and anxiety are not absolutes. That is, if you express one, you do not eliminate the other. Faith can keep company with many sets of ordinary feelings that can be handled and lived with but never removed. Those who insist on a "pure" faith unstained by human emotionality make the denial of reality a condition of faith. But the encouragement of Scripture is to "take heart," not to take cover. We take heart because we believe that human life in its totality becomes enormously fruitful in the

hands of God through the power of His gracious promises. (Steinke, 1993, p. x)

In this I hear Steinke recognizing the intertwining of the faith story, the explicit story, with the anxiety story, the reality of human life story. Steinke uses neurologist Paul MacLean's discussion of the "triune brain" to help explain what happens to an individual and to interactions between individuals and groups when anxiety happens. Anxiety can be positive or negative depending on degree or duration. The "reptilian" part of the brain functions like an automatic pilot. It regulates automatic processes such as circulation and respiration. It serves regularly and continuously and is designed to protect and help the organism survive. It reacts, without thinking, to a threat or perceived threat. The second part of the brain is "mammalian," the house of emotion. This part regulates behavior such as nurturing, playing, bonding, and the expression of emotions such as love, hate, sorrow, rejoicing, shock, and repugnance. It also plays a mediating role between pleasure and pain, tension-relaxation, and fight-flight. The reptilian and mammalian brains, which make up fifteen percent of the brain mass, are well connected by neurons and function automatically and reactively. We need them to be this way in order to live and survive. The "neocortex," the cerebral hemispheres, make up eighty-five percent of the brain mass. This part of the brain thinks, analyses, reflects, symbolizes, observes, and creates. The neocortex allows us to be consciously aware of what we are feeling. The lower two brains not only help a person survive, but also provide much of the colour and warmth of life. From a family emotional process viewpoint, this is where much of the implicit story finds a home. The neocortex, on the other hand, is the place where the explicit story gains a hearing. Steinke observes that when anxiety becomes too great

- impulse overwhelms intention
- instinct sweeps aside imagination
- reflexive behavior closes off reflective thought

- defensive postures block out defined positions
- emotional reactivity limits clearly determined direction (Steinke, 1993, p. 18)

The challenge is to intertwine the explicit story (the gospel) with the implicit story carried in lower brain in such a way that a new story is discovered which lessens the level of anxiety so that love and reason are free to be creative and healing.

Channelling and transforming anxiety in a positive direction is a difficult task. Steinke describes two types of anxiety, acute and chronic. Acute anxiety is situational. When a family member is injured in an accident or a pastor resigns from a congregation the family emotional system experiences acute anxiety. As time goes by the anxiety lessens. The family whose member is injured is told a new explicit story - the injured person will heal. This story channels the anxiety toward that healing process. When a congregation loses its pastor the acute anxiety takes longer to be transformed into positive anticipation of calling a new pastor. It takes longer because a grieving process must occur first. The emotional pathways between the congregational family and the pastor have been severed ( a head has been severed from a body )and a transitional story needs to be told until the story about the hope of a new pastor takes form. When this happens the anxiety is transformed into the excitement and challenge of calling a new pastor. Chronic anxiety occurs when anxiety is structured into life. Steinke says that when church families are chronically anxious, small groups will splinter off at times. Sometimes the congregational family will stay intact but will be manipulated by a small power group. In chronically anxious congregations change is stalled or sabotaged and change agents are punished. To help explain the difference between acute and chronic anxiety, Steinke uses the family story that Jesus told: the story of the father and two sons.(Luke 15:11-32) An interesting aside, which demonstrates how the systems approach has changed our way of thinking, can be seen in the old title for this story, that is, the Prodigal Son. To focus on the prodigal son, the identified patient, is to do

disservice to the family systems story. It is indeed a family systems story of a father and two sons, and a question of inheritance and jealousy.

How can we distinguish between acute and chronic anxiety? Jesus told a story about a family, a father and his two sons. It portrays some of the differences between anxiety that is situational and habitual. The younger son emotionally distances from his family. He travels to a far country and wastes his inheritance. A great famine arises. Bereft of friends and fortune, the son finds himself knee-deep in feeding pigs. Imagine, for a Jew, the shame of it all. Still, he comes to his senses. He has enough capacity to manage his adversity and to use his imagination: "I'll offer myself to my father as a servant." He returns home. Before the younger son reaches the house, his father's joy is already bursting into gracious gestures - a ring, a robe, a pair of sandals, and a centerpiece for his homecoming celebration, a fatted calf. Hearing the noise, the older brother leaves the field and is at the back door inquiring about the boisterous activity. When he discovers that his brother has returned, he broods. We, of course, sympathize with the super responsible firstborn. Without his work there never would have been a fatted calf to kill. Nonetheless, we hear this son's chronic anxiety: "These many years have I served you, and I never disobeyed your command." Unsure of his father's love, he thought that he could keep his father close by being "the good kid." Angry, he slashes at his father with a sharp complaint. "You never sacrificed as much as a goat and barbecued it for my friends and me." Chronic anxiety may show up in thoughtless obedience as well as mindless outbursts. Chronically anxious people, like the older son, keep their focus on others. They are easily and quickly hurt. They see themselves as victims. Yet, as Simone Weil has said, "It is better to say, 'I'm suffering,' than to say, 'This landscape is ugly.'"

Acutely anxious people regain their perspective. There is a return to the Thinking Cap. They have the capacity to control their reactivity. But the chronically anxious have immense difficulty keeping their hands off their own chimes. They are not self-regulating. And they are not imaginative. Note how the father appeals to his oldest son's thinking capacity: "It is fitting to rejoice and give thanks. After all, my son - your brother - was lost and is found. Son, everything I have is yours." There is no response. (Steinke, 1993, pp. 20-21)

This family story shows how a chronically anxious person, in this case the elder son, will jump into either/or, yes/no, or black/white thinking. The elder son in essence says to his father "Favour me or favour your other son. I can't accept anything else." It's all the years of responsible behaviour versus the reckless behaviour of the younger brother. A

person driven by anxiety cannot think or reflect. A person driven by anxiety will overfocus on others and their weaknesses and falsely criticize or blame. To the elder brother the problem is external to himself and he is unable to see his own reactive stance and be responsible for it. Because of his anxiety he cannot think systemically and realize that he is his own worst enemy. It's important to note also in Jesus' story that the elder brother is "willful". If the chronically anxious person cannot ease his pain by blaming he'll try another way. He'll make you suffer. He'll spoil the party. Differences that can't be tolerated are persecuted.

As Steinke points out, this is true of church families as well. Steinke says that chronically anxious people in a congregation are the ones apt to conduct a "search and destroy mission". They impose their will, make hostages of their gifts, attendance, and participation, and threaten to withdraw their membership if their demand is not met. Unfortunately congregations that want peace remain in bondage to such people. (Steinke, 1993, p.22) Steinke offers some possibilities for dealing with anxiety in the church family. He says:

If relational processes are similar to cellular processes, no relationship system can sustain or restore its health without positive response: focus of its energy in goal-directed activity; awareness; self-management; sense of meaning, thoughtfulness, mutual exchange; and dialogue. (Steinke, 1993, p. 122)

Each of these involve the telling of a new story. For example, to focus energy in a goal-directed activity would mean the redefining of values, a story about the purpose of this church family and why it would work toward such a goal. The same holds for the other activities Steinke mentions, "awareness; self-management; sense of meaning, thoughtfulness, mutual exchange and dialogue." These all require a story of reflective thought. Even to do this requires the framework of a story that looks at the disturbances of anxiety as challenges to grow, to define being, to define self better and stay in touch with others in the community.



One of the main explicit stories of the congregational family is the story of forgiveness. Nothing tests the depth and strength of faith and love more than forgiveness. Forgiveness by its true nature always occurs within the emotional processes of the congregational family as well as the family and extended family. Forgiveness is difficult because when we are offended or hurt anxiety kicks in and we respond automatically. Our thinking becomes unfocused and in our agitated state our behaviour is less decisive and less directed. The story which gives our life meaning and purpose becomes severely distorted or lost completely for a time. One reaction may be that we withdraw in order to avoid conflict. Certain conditions must be met in order for us to come back and participate in the relationship system again. This is not forgiving. It's bargaining, There is no letting go in conditional love. The implicit story here is that I can only define myself over against the offender. There is a loss of self.

The other extreme occurs when the offended person denies the hurt and offers forgiveness lightly in order to secure the harmony the relationship demands. In this case the self loses its boundary. Love that has no boundary will only perpetuate injustice. Forgiveness does not mean protecting those who are deceitful and mean-spirited. The better differentiated a person is, the better able that person is to forgive. Forgiveness requires being able to stand back to be a self, to be objective at a time when feeling processes for survival and self-preservation are burning hot. Being self-differentiated and being able to think does not eliminate the feeling processes when being offended but it brings an awareness to the point where we can be responsible for these feeling processes. Forgiveness requires more than just thinking. It is not helpful to the forgiveness process if we "rationalize" our feelings. Anxiety is in control of our thinking brain when we deny, dissociate, or justify our feelings. Forgiveness is a process. Time is needed for the emotional heat to cool down; then clear thinking can be done. Steinke reminds us that forgiveness is a free gift from God. He proposes that the ultimate way to forgiveness is by intertwining our story of hurt to God's story of forgiveness. When

Steinke is working with emotionally charged church families, he routinely asks what stories or biblical words are generated by their anxious situation. He also asks them how they understand what is happening theologically and what "spiritual" work needs to be done. He finds that often people moralize or use cliches such as "power struggle" or "poor chemistry" but have little capacity to define themselves as Christians making direct use of their symbols, ceremonies and stories. (Steinke, 1993, pp.124-5) Steinke suggests that the way for a church family to function when highly anxious is to reflect theologically about what is happening. The church family needs to remember its faith story and to intertwine it with anxiety's implicit story. The implicit anxiety story needs to be accepted as a challenge to grow and change and the explicit faith story needs to be responded to with imagination and a changing of the mind.

In his book *Healthy Congregations - A Systems Approach*, Peter L. Steinke expands the theme of accepting anxiety and its symptoms as a call to spiritual growth in a congregational family system. How people care, respond to, and manage their life together he calls "stewardship of the congregation." The explicit story of the congregation needs to recognize that "health is not the absence of disease. Health and disease are not opposites." (Steinke, 1996, p. vii) Steinke uses a medical understanding of the human body as a way of understanding the emotional processes in a congregation. Disease is present in the human body all the time. A healthy functioning body will not allow the disease to find a place to infiltrate and feed off the body. When a body suffers an emotional blow which causes the anxiety level to rise it becomes vulnerable to the disease. The body naturally strives for health and the symptoms that appear are actually the body attempting to deal with the disease. When a body overcomes a disease it grows in strength and wisdom building up an immunity to the disease it will recognize in the future. Applying this analogy to a church family, what would a healthy congregation look like?

To address questions about the health of a congregation, we need to have in mind some picture of what health means. Health is wholeness. Health means all the parts are working together to maintain balance. Health means all the parts are interacting to function as a whole. Health is a continuous process, the ongoing interplay of multiple forces and conditions. (Steinke, 1996, p. vii)

Viewing the congregational family as an organic unit certainly has its support in the New Testament. The church is described by the metaphor "the body of Christ" thirty-seven times.

Steinke's organic view for understanding healthy congregations provides a powerful key to unlocking the healing power of the explicit gospel story.

It is easy to impose institutional values on health, as reflected in the phrase "healthy, growing churches." An organic view, however, prevents us from imposing on health a meaning it does not have. Organic processes are not linear. They are not merely progressive or expansive. Some organic processes promote growth through decay, shedding, and breakdown. Some organic growth is downward - a deepening, a rooting, a maturing process. An organic view will not allow us to make health synonymous with enlargement and mass. Organic life comes in many sizes and shapes, all of which may be said to be healthy.

At times health is manifested by growth in size. At other times health involves sheer maintenance, with little or no growth at all. The Western idea of growth is "get big, get strong, and win." Westerners assume an increase in size will ensure continuation or survival of the organism. Unfortunately this understanding is carried over into notions about congregational health. Growing churches are assumed to be healthy, especially in contrast to what are called "maintenance" churches. Congregations engaged in upkeep are disparaged, even relegated to the realm of the "diseased." "Maintenance" becomes a pejorative term. After all, work involving housekeeping tasks brings the lowest wages and requires the lowest skills. Yet the word *maintenance* itself is positive. It derives from *main* (hand) and *teneo* (keep). It is caring for something by hand. It is managing. A large part of health is maintenance (brushing teeth, washing hands, taking vitamins, exercising).

We do a great disservice to congregations whose growth is minimal, static, or even in decline when we say they are unhealthy without regard to their stage of development or context. Most of the time whether a church expands is a matter of demographics, totally unrelated to health issues. Organically, nothing grows forever. Growth ceases sooner or later. (Steinke, 1996, pp. viii-ix)

This is a refreshing look at the congregational family. Such a reframing will encourage congregations and their leaders to look to fulfill its meanings in all its stories whether in conditions of health or disease, growth or decline.

Intertwining the faith story with the implicit story of the congregation Steinke calls "Higher Medicines". Beliefs influence behaviour. Mutual conversation and consolation, theological discussion, the sharing of stories in the light of the gospel story bring meaning and affect health in the congregation. Steinke suggests making a genogram of a congregation that takes note of membership size, date, ministers, additions, deletions, and stressors. The genogram will help the church family understand its story. In the story of its family tree the congregation will be able to see its strengths and resources as well as its weakness and diseases. This will enable the congregation to focus on its healing resources, strengths, options, and not the disease process. It will be able to create a new story, a new vision.

Steinke says that faith and prayer "are strengths for coping with and changing reality." (Steinke, 1996, p. 82)

Faith and prayer are closely connected to Jesus' ministry of healing. After the crowds came to hear him and he healed them, it is said that "he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God" (Luke 6:12). Standing before the tomb of Lazarus and before he cried out, "Come forth!" Jesus lifted his eyes upward and said, "Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me" (John 11:41 RSV). On three occasions, Jesus said to the sick, "Your faith has made you well" (Mark 5:34; 10:57; Luke 17:15). To the blind man, Jesus said, "Do you believe that I am able to do this?" (Matthew 9:28). To the Canaanite woman, he exclaimed, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish," and her daughter was healed instantly (Matthew 15:28). When a paralyzed man lying on a bed was brought to Jesus, Jesus healed the man, noticing the faith of the people who carried his bed (Mark 2:1-12). Indeed, prayer and faith are higher remedies. (Steinke, 1996, p. 83)

Jesus became involved in the families around him and through faith and prayer their implicit family emotional process stories, the stories that brought unhealth, were

transformed into stories of health when intertwined with the good news story in a manner which helped them reframe their family stories.

Steinke also brings our attention to the relational nature of life for the creation and transmission of intertwined stories. He says that we are created for relationship and creation is relational. The biblical record is filled with stories of relationships. Truth and reality is known only in relationship interactions. (Steinke, 1996, pp.83-4) The greatest strength of this book is its perspective on the symptoms of dis-ease or anxiety within the congregational family. Congregations naturally want to exclude these negative aspects from their story. Steinke says that it's in facing up to these problems armed with our faith story (higher medicine) that we find the way to a more healthy story for the whole congregational family.

#### **Chapter 4: Intertwining The Stories**

**“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth”. (John 1:14)**

During the 1960’s the church in which I grew up had a problem. It was having an identity crisis which centred around the question of being relevant. There was a dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. Some of us in the church struggled to connect what we did at worship on Sunday with what we did at work on Monday. Many people began to leave the church because it did not speak to or model a way of living out one’s implicit story in the family and in the work place family. People still attended church for weddings, baptisms, funerals, and at Christmas and Easter. This showed that people knew that faith spoke to special occasions but that it didn’t speak to the sweat and tears of the work place or the brutal competition of the market place. There was no story framework to link everyday life and toils with the faith story of the church. Another area where the church’s ministry was weak was in marriage and family problems. There were rules written and unwritten for people suffering from divorce or suicide, but again there were no stories to link them to the faith story taking into account the family emotional process. People hurting from alcoholism and violence would not look for a healing story in the church.

Philip Yancy in his book *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* shares a true story that illustrates this very effectively.

I told a story in my book *The Jesus I Never Knew*, a true story that long afterward continued to haunt me. I heard it from a friend who works with the down-and-out in Chicago:

A prostitute came to me in wretched straits, homeless, sick, unable to buy food for her two-year-old daughter. Through sobs and tears, she told me she had been renting out her daughter - two years

old! - to men interested in kinky sex. She made more renting out her daughter for an hour than she could earn on her own in a night. She had to do it, she said, to support her own drug habit. I could hardly bear hearing her sordid story. For one thing, it made me legally liable - I'm required to report cases of child abuse. I had no idea of what to say to this woman.

At last I asked if she had ever thought of going to a church for help. I will never forget the look of pure, naive shock that crossed her face. "Church!" she cried. "Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse."

What struck me about my friend's story is that women much like this prostitute fled toward Jesus, not away from him. The worse a person felt about herself, the more likely she saw Jesus as a refuge. Has the church lost that gift? Evidently the down-and-out, who flocked to Jesus when he lived on earth, no longer feel welcome among his followers. What has happened? (Yancy, 1997, p. 11)

It's not just the down-and-out who do not look for Jesus in the church; it's the many who are dying of spiritual starvation lost in the wilderness of the information age without a way to connect their life story with the faith story of the Bible.

Loughlan Sofield, S.T. and Donald H. Kuhn in their book *The Collaborative Leader - Listening to the Wisdom of God's People* address the apparent dichotomy of the sacred and the secular by exploring Christian leadership. Forty-two Christians - "wisdom people" who earn their living in various occupations in the workplace share their stories. The central theme of their stories is the deeply felt need for a more inclusive concept of ministry.

With such clear documents illuminating the expansive concept of ministry, it is disheartening to realize that those engaged in ministries in the world are not often acknowledged by church leaders. What we heard from the wisdom people is that there is little encouragement and support extended to those laboring in the world. There are few homilies (stories) which deal substantively with the issues they regularly face. Adult education programs that they might attend are mostly focused on church-related themes. Their occupations and skills are recognized and supported only when some value from them might accrue to the church organization. The wisdom people tell us that rarely is their responsibility for carrying Jesus' message to the world proclaimed, explored, and celebrated.

We believe that one of the roots of the problem is a limited view of spirituality on the part of church leaders. Rather than seeing full integration of all that one is and does as the substance of the spiritual life, they emphasize the explicitly spiritual activities with which they are primarily concerned. Sadly, the result is that many people find leaders' messages somewhat irrelevant. What they emphasize does not deal with the realities of daily life where spiritual concepts and values are tested. (Sofield and Kuhn, 1995, p. 92)

The stories shared by these "wisdom people" clearly reveal the need to explore ways to intertwine the explicit story of the church, the gospel, with the implicit stories of the people.

Murray Bowen has gifted us with a better understanding of how we function emotionally in the relationships of our families, and also in other groups that function as families. Edwin H. Friedman takes Bowen theory a step further by applying the family emotional process to religious communities. He goes to great lengths to demonstrate how the family emotional process can sabotage or derail the best spiritual intentions. Peter L. Steinke goes a step deeper in looking at the way our triune brain functions within and is influenced by the family emotional process. Friedman and Steinke both emphasize that healthy functioning is discovered when our higher brain (neocortex) intertwines the explicit story of the church with the implicit story of the family emotional process. This chapter will explore this challenge.

When we reflect on the stories in the Bible, taking into account the family emotional process, a new dynamic is realized. Formerly, and in some cases still, the church has tried to force the stories in the Bible into linear thinking, good/bad, right/wrong, light/darkness. Lutherans have struggled over being a saint and a sinner at the same time for centuries. When faced with the great paradoxes in the Bible, Jesus the shepherd and the lamb, Israel a small and despised nation and yet a light unto the rest of the world, the defeat and victory of the cross, we call them mysteries, and they are. But they are mysteries no more so than life itself. Family emotional process helps us to see good/bad, right/wrong, light/darkness in a broader, more comprehensive way, and



also reveals more of the paradoxes of faith and life. Family emotional process helps us understand that being good or being bad is not always a decision one makes on his/her own. Family emotional process helps in understanding our interconnectedness. A person doesn't choose to become the "black sheep of the family." The family needs a "black sheep" because that's the way the family has written its story. That's the paradigm through which the family views its life story. That's how the family has learned to handle its anxiety. It is a story line that may have been passed down through generations. What manifests itself in the behavior of the "black sheep" can never be resolved or healed by a linear story framed on a good-bad continuum. Goodness and badness and who in the family will manifest it is a choice the whole family makes through the process of the family emotional system. As Friedman has pointed out, the person in the most vulnerable position in the emotional family unit is the one who will become the symptom bearer for the family. If the head of this family is enlightened and has self understanding of how his triune brain functions (cf. Steinke) and has knowledge of the power of the emotional family processes, he or she will be able to deal with the family's anxiety in a more healthy way. This requires a new story. A story that takes into account the family emotional process wherein the energy of the life force plays itself out in the individuality - togetherness continuum, in chronic anxiety, in emotional cutoff, in interlocking triangles, and in the defining of self through differentiation. (cf. Kerr and Bowen)

But the new story requires more, otherwise the persons in the most controlling positions will sabotage any effort to create a more healthy family emotional system. The new story requires the intertwining of the divine story. Herbert Anderson and Edward Foley in their book *Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals: Weaving Together the Human and the Divine* offer some valuable insights for accomplishing this. These authors see the need to link narrative and ritual as a way to intertwine the divine story with the human. By examining our rituals at home, at work, at play and in our religious practices

we can see patterns in the way we interact. Storytelling, the narrative, has long been the way we make meaning for our life and life events.

*Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals* is about connecting the stories we tell with the rituals we enact. Ritual and story are common ways within a particular social context by which we order and interpret our world. They are necessary because storytelling and ritualizing together provide the vehicles for reconnecting God's story with our human stories. When easy commerce between the divine and human narratives occurs both in worship and in pastoral care, storytelling and ritualizing have the power to transform persons and communities of faith into signs of the presence of God. (Anderson and Foley, 1998, p. ix)

Bringing narrative and ritual together is a useful way to link worship and pastoral care. This is important because there is a lack of ritual models for many of the significant life events that occur in today's world. There are no rituals for when a child leaves home, or a job disappears because of downsizing. One of my former parishioners was shot while decorating his Christmas tree in his home. My parishioner was of German descent and the neighbour who shot him was Jewish. On the surface it seemed as though the feud was over petty things like the lawn sprinkler getting the neighbour's driveway wet. But my parishioner was shot five times with a .357 magnum. That's a lot of anger. I am certain that the story goes back to the Holocaust. My parishioner told his story of being shot over and over again. He took me through his house and showed me the bullet holes in the wall and the carpet. On the same night, the neighbour who shot my parishioner also shot and killed a convenience store operator and as a result received a life sentence. My parishioner was haunted with nightmares and memories of this tragic story. I listened to him tell his story over and over. I could hear him trying to make meaning out of it. This was his house. He has done a lot of work on it. He even included the divine story. He was putting an angel on the top of the Christmas tree when it happened. The angel was with him! He welcomed my offer to bless his house. I used the ritual from the Occasional Services book,

**"Blessing of a Dwelling". Although it was very comforting it was not enough to overcome such trauma. My parishioner and his family moved to another home.**

**I share this story to emphasize what Anderson and Foley claim:**

**Second, the standard public rituals in churches are often ceremonies without stories - ritual that has become disconnected from peoples' lives. In sermons, song texts, and the prayers that punctuate worship, the human narrative and the divine narrative seldom connect. The ceremony may be proper, but the rituals have no soul. Much of the current dispute about worship in this era of broad liturgical reform misses the point. (Anderson and Foley, 1998, p. x)**

**I would hope that we would not need a ritual for someone being shot, but there are many events in people's lives that could benefit from rituals that contained the stories of everyday life. "Stories and rituals are not only necessary personal resources for growth and stability; they are the ways that faith communities frame our journeys in God."**

**(Anderson and Foley, 1998, p. x) Anderson and Foley share the viewpoint of Biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan who in his book *The Dark Interval* (1975) suggests that all stories fall someplace on a continuum between myth and parable. "Myth, as Crossan uses the term, mediates between irreducible opposites. It seeks to resolve contradiction and paradox." An example of a modern day myth would be the mythic wedding where every detail is perfect and all disagreements are hidden and human imperfection is covered. Wedding day may not be reality, but it will be a story that is told over and over as a process of coming to terms with this major life cycle event. The myth's main underlying theme is the undiminished possibility of reconciliation of opposites. Year after year, for example, the undying myth of Santa Claus continues. In the Santa Claus myth we try to bring opposites together. In a world where there is poverty and want, everybody gets something. We need our myths to help make meaning of our life stories. The parable is on the other end of the myth-parable continuum. The parable is a story about contradiction.**

Parables challenge our expectations of a world without blemish. In the parables of Jesus, the last are first, and the meek inherit the earth. The parabolic perspective creates contradiction in both narrative and ritual in order to reveal a truth that is otherwise hidden.

Both myth and parable are necessary in storytelling and in ritual making. That itself is a paradox. We need to believe that all things do work together for good for those who love God. That is a fundamental Christian myth that helps us endure the parabolic reality that wheat and weeds grow together, and God intends it so. Human beings are inclined toward the mythic, and because of that we need to keep the parabolic perspective alive, lest we believe that mythic weddings will make happy marriages, lest we become trapped in mythic expectations of perfection. Although we might like to make our own story into a myth without contradictions, the parabolic approach is consistent with the Christian story. Parabolic stories invite transformation by opening us to the possibility of something new. The Jesus story is the ultimate parable - it challenges our mythic dreams of a life without suffering or contradictions. (Anderson and Foley, 1998, pp. xi-xii)

Anderson and Foley point out that stories and rituals are both powerful and dangerous. A story can lead us into a great adventure or it can lead us into trouble. Sometimes a family system can become stuck by a myth that can be harmful. For example, men in this family are real men and women are meant to serve them. Such a narrative can lead to a lot of unhappiness and disillusionment for generations. Congregational families are not exempt from harmful myths. The most common is "we always do it this way". This myth stifles the explicit story of the Gospel. When a pastor or a few lay leaders in such a congregation try to do something a new way it fails. Why? Armed with the understanding of family systems theory and an understanding of how our triune brain functions a more healthy response can result. "We always do it this way" is a myth that helps the congregational family control its anxiety. By listening to the stories of the families and researching the genogram of the congregation's family tree an understanding will be discovered. This is not so simple. There could be a number of factors contributing. Some trauma may have occurred. A pastor, a prominent member, or a child (cf. Steinke) may have been killed in an accident. What story does a congregation tell when "bad things happen to good church people?" A myth can be

helpful during the acute stage of trauma. It's a story to cling to. But a parable is also necessary to keep the emotional wound open until it heals properly otherwise the congregational family becomes stuck in chronic anxiety. Yes, we do believe that the person suddenly killed is in God's hands. That's our myth. It reconciles opposites, death and life, the finite and the infinite. It is a story of hope. There is a parable here too. Having faith means losing the harmful myth that we are in control of life. When we stay in this parable, the divine story has a better opportunity to touch our pain and heal us. By revisiting the congregation's story, a new story can be discovered where the explicit Gospel story intertwines with the implicit story of the congregational family in a manner that will produce a reframed story. The congregational family will be set free to grow spiritually and to minister more effectively.

Anderson and Foley make a distinction between stories that are harmful and stories that are dangerous. Harmful stories keep us stuck and keep us separated from one another. They prevent the healthy flow of life and even jam the divine story. The dangerous story on the other hand is the story that shakes us up in a positive way. Baptism is an example of a dangerous story.

The Christian ritual of baptism, for instance, is dangerous because not only does it promise God's presence and initiate each baptized person into a sustaining community of faith; it also marks an individual with the sign of Christ's cross - a reminder that living comes through dying. The cross is a dangerous symbol - challenging and contradictory, it upsets our desire for order or control. The invitation of baptism to live in the shadow of a cross makes it a dangerous ritual. (Anderson and Foley, 1998, p. xiii)

Unfortunately, the power and the danger of the ritual story of baptism can be overshadowed by the family emotional process. Sometimes a baby is baptized because grandma wants it done. Sometimes the parabolic story of baptism becomes lost in the mythic story of a baptismal dress passed down for several generations. These family stories are not necessarily negative. On the contrary, by being tuned into the family

emotional process behind them (the implicit story) a pastor has the opportunity to link them with the divine story in a very powerful way.

Our rituals, whether in our family or in our church family, in a manner similar to our narratives fall along the mythic-parable continuum. Rituals that lean toward the mythic ignore contradictions and create or continue a story that everything is going to be all right. The ritual of the finance minister giving his budget each year tends to be mythic. We are told that things are going to change and life will be better for us materially but of course it doesn't. Contradictions are ignored.

The parabolic ritual embodies the painful and the discordant. A Remembrance Day service is a parabolic ritual in that it remembers the pain and sadness of war. No ritual is at one extreme or the other. A Remembrance Day service also contains the mythic in that it embraces a continued hope for peace and freedom. From a family systems point of view a mythic ritual would be used by a family in distress to ease its anxiety over a stressful situation. In my family of origin whenever something stressful happened - a car accident or the birth of a grandchild - my mother would put the kettle on and make some tea. This was a mythic ritual that brought everyone to the kitchen table no matter what the time of day. We created a family story about the event. The cup of tea embodied warmth and comfort, and it combined with the narrative story we wove around the stressful incident. Other family rituals can be more parabolic. For example, the husband who comes home drunk night after night and yells and breaks things. This is a parabolic ritual in that it reveals that there is pain and discord in the emotional family unit. In true parabolic form it lays the family secret open for the possibility of change. The power of the parabolic ritual to change family emotional process is often thwarted by a mythic ritual of placating - just one more time and things will be better.

If we listen closely, we can hear the family emotional process revealed in the family stories. If we watch closely, we can see the family emotional process played out in family

rituals. Murray Bowen's concept of the individuality-togetherness continuum can be seen in family relationships as a ritual dance. Husband and wife come close and move apart, come close and move apart. Parents and children, siblings, the whole extended family may display in their rituals the individuality-togetherness dance. Chronic anxiety can be seen as well in the rituals between and among individuals in a family. Nagging, for example, can be a ritual response to chronic anxiety. Emotional cutoff can become a ritual pattern in a person's life. Some persons go from relationship to relationship emotionally cutting off from the previous one and then beginning the ritual all over again in the search for the mythical mate. Interlocking triangles is a ritual behaviour. When a daughter is anxious in her relationship with her husband, she calls her mother or father and ritually triangles to release her stress. The defining of self through differentiation can become a ritual as well. The positive nature of the ritual of differentiation lies in its reflective process about self in relationship and its striving for meaning within.

Ritual making and storytelling are the tools through which we perceive the world and our unique place in it. Storytelling and ritual making are also the ways that we communicate the meanings that we have co-authored. These meanings are co-authored because they are influenced by others who are in our family emotional field and reciprocally our family emotional field is influenced by these meanings.

Undergirding our stories and our rituals is the family emotional process to which we are connected. Such an understanding has great potential for health in the human community. When our stories and rituals are intertwined with the divine story the possibilities for healthy living and relating are greatly magnified. Anderson and Foley share this view:

The potential for a personally and communally transformative encounter is significantly magnified when the divine and human intersect in our storytelling and ritualizing. We are transformed in part because we begin to understand our particular story as part of a larger, transcendent narrative. God has chosen to coauthor a redemptive story for us and with us in

human history, and in so doing has invited us to reshape radically the horizon of all other storytelling and ritual making. It is the transformative possibility of this invitation that has galvanized our interest in integrating worship and pastoral care more fully in order to deepen the connection between God's narrative and our own. (Anderson and Foley, 1998, p.37)

In Jesus Christ the human and divine narrative converge. Jesus was born into a human family. His family, like every family, experienced the family emotional process and his disciples became a part of his extended family field. In Mark 3, Jesus had been teaching a crowd and did not have time to eat. When his family heard about the commotion that Jesus was causing they came to take him home.

A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3:32-35)

We can see in this story the family emotional process at work. Jesus' mother and his sisters and brothers are anxious about what is happening to their family because of his ministry. In their anxiety they try to sabotage Jesus' work because they are upset about the story going around that he has gone out of his mind. Jesus, who is well self-differentiated, defines his position clearly. His family consists of those who do God's will not the will of anxiety in the family emotional process. The divine story of Jesus' mission is intertwined with his family's implicit family emotional process story of anxiety and the result is a new story about a larger family system which is made up of those who do the will of God.

In Matthew Jesus tells a strange parabolic story. Jesus says that he did not come to bring peace but rather a sword and division.

And one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 10:36-39)



We can view this text as a clear message about the cost of discipleship. The cost is high. How can Jesus ask us to give up loving our son or daughter in order to follow him? Does he not remind us that the second most important commandment is to love our neighbour as ourself? When viewed from a family emotional process perspective we can see deeper into its meaning. When we accept Jesus' call to follow him we open ourselves to a process of self-differentiation. This is a process in which the narrative which defines our being grows and changes more and more as we intertwine our story with the divine story. As we have seen in Bowen theory the more self-differentiated we become while still remaining in emotional contact the more healthy we are. Peter Steinke points out that the more self-differentiated we are the better able we are to use our "thinking brain" in times of high anxiety and emotional conflict. Another side to this parable of Jesus is discovered in family systems theory as well. Psychiatrists, pastoral counsellors and therapists have all seen the devastating results of a family that is enmeshed or undifferentiated. The story of grown children who have never left their family of origin is a sad story of a life wasted, potential never realized, gifts and talents never developed and shared. That's what happens when a family tries to cope with its anxiety by "saving its life," by emotionally clinging together. From a family systems perspective what Jesus says makes perfect sense. "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 10:39) This same story can be told for congregational families that focus on self-preservation, congregational families that are emotionally closed.

Family systems theory is not a substitute for the powerful biblical narrative and the rituals and stories and the myths and parables we have come to know and to share in our families and our church families. Family systems theory adds a valuable perspective to these stories. Viewed or experienced from the family systems theory, a greater depth of emotional connection is realized in the intertwining of the divine and human narratives. Family systems theory opens up new ways of incorporating pastoral

counselling into worship and Christian education. The real sin in our families and congregations is not that evil things happen but that we fail to recognize them as challenges or even calls from God to grow and change, to self-differentiate, and gain an even greater understanding of the magnificence of God's love.

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