

# Family Dysfunction

The Rev. Dr. Peter G.  
James

Acts 25:13-27

Sermon Series:  
God's Big Story

***Dysfunction...  
the therapeutic  
equivalent for  
our religious  
word "sin."***

My Uncle John serves as family historian. He has traced our family lineage to a little town along the Rhine River in Germany. My great, great grandfather, George Jacob Renner, immigrated to Covington, Kentucky with his mother and five siblings in 1849. George married Saraphina Appleman, herself a recent German immigrant. He became a master brewer and opened several breweries in Ohio. Don't you think my profession is a bit ironic, given that my family earned its livelihood from making beer for a hundred years?

Families pass down physical characteristics. Maybe that's where I get my size; my great, great grandfather was 6'3" and 260 pounds. Families also pass along psychological and spiritual characteristics, both for good and for ill. Admirable and dubious qualities alike are passed down in families. Some families function well, others function less well or not well at all. Dysfunction has become a trendy word in our day to describe families that function less well. It's the therapeutic equivalent for our religious word "sin."

You don't get any more dysfunctional than the Herodian family, who predominate the New Testament era. Two members of

Herod's family, Agrippa and Bernice feature prominently in today's lesson from Acts 25.

Agrippa was the great grandson of Herod the Great. You may remember from the Christmas story that Herod murdered the children of Bethlehem in a frantic attempt to destroy the baby Jesus. Herod also had five wives. He was so paranoid that he executed his first wife along with the two sons he had with her.

Agrippa was a grandnephew to Herod Antipas, who divorced his wife to marry his niece Herodias, his half-brother's wife. John the Baptist denounced their marriage, which ultimately cost him his head. Pontius Pilate sent Jesus to Antipas, who mocked him and directed him back to be crucified. When Jesus called Herod Antipas a fox, he wasn't complimenting him (Luke 13:32.)

Agrippa's father was no paragon of virtue either. He's the tetrarch responsible for executing James and imprisoning Peter. His son Agrippa and Bernice were actually brother and sister. Bernice was formerly married to her uncle, her father's brother, but took up residence with her brother when her marriage unraveled. Their relationship was, by all accounts, incestuous. She tried to cover it by an ill-fated marriage to a neighboring king and a disastrous affair with a military officer.

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Maybe the Herodian family will make you feel better about your own family's dysfunction. It's hard to imagine two people less qualified to rule on the merits of Paul's trial.

Last Sunday, we left off in Acts 24 with Paul's trial before Felix, the Roman governor of Judea. Felix takes a pass on the charges levied against Paul, but as a favor to the Jews, leaves him in jail for someone else to unscramble. Felix is desposed two years later by Emperor Nero, after the Jewish citizens protest his barbarous quelling of an uprising.

Porcius Festus is appointed by Nero to take Felix's place. Festus wants to ingratiate himself to the Jewish people, so he pays them a courtesy call. Paul's two-year jail sentence has failed to dampen Jewish antagonism against Paul. They ask a favor from Festus (25:3). Notice they ask him a favor rather than justice to be served. Justice would have exonerated Paul long ago. They request that Festus transfer Paul from Caesarea to Jerusalem to stand trial. Luke tells us they are planning to ambush Paul and take him out.

Festus agrees to reopen the case in Caesarea (25:4). Paul's opponents drum up the same bogus charges they made two years previous—that Paul is both anti-Roman and anti-Jewish.

Festus expresses a willingness to move Paul's formal trial to Jerusalem as a favor to the people. This would also enable him to wash his hands of the whole sordid mess (25:9). Paul knows he will

not receive a fair trial in Jerusalem, so he exercises his right as a Roman citizen to appeal to Caesar. Luke is deliberate to mention that Paul is not being cowardly. Paul is willing to die for what he believes. His going to Jerusalem fulfills the mission God set out for him (23:11).

Here's where Agrippa and Bernice enter the picture. While making a state visit to Festus, they become familiar with the particulars of Paul's case. Verses 14-21 indicate that Festus is out of his league when dealing with religious issues. He admits to being at a loss as to how to investigate such matters (25:20). His specialty is quelling insurrections, not resurrections!

King Agrippa is sufficiently intrigued to request an audience with Paul. Agrippa and Bernice parade into the Hall of Audience the next day in their royal purple robes, followed by Festus decked out in the scarlet dress of the Roman governor. Everybody bows and scraps, everyone except Paul, whose diminutive stature, prisoner's tunic and shackles serve as a striking contrast to the pomp and circumstance of the king and queen. Paul is clearly the center of attention. When he is given the privilege of the floor, he delivers perhaps the greatest defense of the gospel in the annals of the New Testament. His speech serves as a climax to the book of Acts. Come back next Sunday for the rest of the story!

We come to the "so what" portion of this sermon. So what difference does Acts 25 and this sermon make in my life?

***Today's lesson from Acts illustrates the capacity for religious people to use religion for their own ends.***

I have two observations to make from the text. The first has to do with the chief priests and religious leaders of Paul's day. They are a rather sorry lot. At the beginning of the chapter, they are willing to abandon due process to mastermind Paul's ambush. Doesn't the 6th command forbid murdering people? Then they whip up charges against Paul that they cannot prove. No wonder they can't prove them, because they aren't true. Doesn't the 9th command prohibit bearing false witness against their neighbor?

Jesus has the hardest time with religious people. His greatest opposition comes not from unbelievers but from believers. Jesus' resistance from religious people indicts our tendency to use religion for self-righteous, self-serving ways. We imagine God as our errand boy or genie in a bottle. We conceive of God as a benevolent grandparent, who winks at evil. We create God in our image, rather than taking our rightful place as people created in God's image.

The news this week is filled with the massacre at Ft. Hood. It seems incredulous for a psychiatrist to go on a rampage and kill 13 people and injure 38 others. When people speculate about the killer's motives, his Muslim religion is often cited. As surely as I lash out against Muslim extremists, I know there are Christian extremists who loom out there, determined to bomb abortion clinics and brutalize gay people, using Jesus' teachings as justifi-

cation. Some Christians buttressed slavery in our country, citing the Bible as proof. Today's lesson from Acts illustrates the capacity for religious people to use religion for their own ends.

My second observation centers on the Apostle Paul. This missionary endures more abuse and more injustice than anyone I've ever known or read about, excepting, of course, Jesus Christ. I marvel at Paul's ability to preach the gospel under the most adverse circumstances. Paul is put on trial five times in a span of seven chapters in Acts. I might be tempted to fuss and whine at God. Yet, Paul sees his difficult circumstances as a platform to bear witness to Jesus Christ. He preaches to people down and out as well as people up and in. I might be tempted to write off people like Agrippa and Bernice. They are disgusting people, lost causes. Not Paul. Nobody is outside the pole of God's grace.

God visits Paul in Acts 21 through the prophet Agabus to announce that he must take the gospel to Jerusalem and Rome. God doesn't outfit Paul with an earpiece so God can whisper to him every step of the way—go here, say this, do that. Yet, Paul never diverts from his primary calling. He stays on task and on point to bear witness, in all five trials, to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In his first impromptu trial before an angry mob, he shares how an encounter with the resurrected Jesus on the Damascus road changed his life (Acts 22). In his trial before the Sanhedrin, he declares, "I'm on trial because of my

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hope in the resurrection of the dead” (Acts 23:6). Paul says nearly the identical words to Felix at his third trial: “It’s concerning the resurrection of the dead that I am on trial before you today” (24:21). Next Sunday, we’ll examine Paul’s fourth trial, in which he looks down the barrel of Roman power brokers and doesn’t flinch: “Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?” (Acts 26:8).

I know it’s not Easter, we’re only a few weeks removed from Thanksgiving, but we are Easter people. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the sine qua non of the Christian faith. For Paul, the resurrection validates Jesus as the long awaited Messiah. His resurrection demonstrates the voracity of Jesus’ claims. His resurrection wins a surprising victory over the powers of evil and death.

The earliest description of the resurrection from Paul’s own hand originates in his first letter to the Corinthians: “For what I received I passed on to you of first importance, that Christ died for our sins, that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day” (1 Corinthians 15:5). Paul goes on to declare, “If Christ is not raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith” (1 Corinthians 15:14).

Let me go back to our seven covenants or practices of a Christian. Since we don’t have time to mention all seven, let me highlight three of them.

Give Generously. We are asking you to make a financial pledge to the Lord’s work in this church

so we can share God’s Big Story with people near and far away. Jesus Christ can redeem anyone. He can redeem anything.

Serve Creatively. Let me return to our Minute for Witness for a moment. Jayson’s testimony was a stirring reminder not to listen to the self-incriminating voices inside our heads that tell us we are shy or fat or unimportant. We are children of the living God and disciples of the risen Lord. God has work for us to do. God calls us to break camp and take the message to the whole world.

Witness Boldly. The book of Acts chronicles the amazing transformation of Jesus’ once timid disciples into bold witnesses. Let’s pray for Spirit-led, Christ-centered boldness to speak God’s Word into people’s lives.

