

# The wounded family

## What do you need to do to find peace?

By Rev. Seth Perry

*Jesus showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you” (John 20:20–21).*

Even after the resurrection, Jesus presents the wounds, which become a source of peace and healing. When it comes to humankind, emotional and psychological wounds often lead us to hurt others.

It’s common for those closest to us, our family, to bear the brunt of our anguish when we are wounded. Hopefully, our wounds can heal, transforming us to reconcile the pain we encounter in our lives.

When I was 17, my family hit a cougar with our car. Thankfully, all passengers emerged unscathed. People always inquire, “What happened to the cougar?” My Dad relishes telling this story, always emphasizing, “We didn’t stick around to find out!”

Desperation can alter the behaviour of mountain lions. When emaciated, diseased, or hurt, they’ve been known to attack humans. The thought of an injured cougar attacking us frightened us.

During active addiction, I was like a wounded mountain lion. I was defensively hostile when offered help. My untreated bipolar disorder and addiction were open wounds needing immediate attention. When my family approached, I lashed out.

Fortunately, I eventually received assistance and healed my wounds. However, once wounded, I was forever changed. I’ve come to accept that the wounds from my addiction and mental health condition will always impact my life. I

was diagnosed with bipolar disorder in 2005 and publicly disclosed this diagnosis in February 2023. Upon going public, I received a comment from another pastor online that broke my heart.

The comment read: “Truthfully, trusting the competence of a person with a mental health condition is an issue.” I had prepared myself for various responses to my disclosure, expecting problematic comments from the pews, not from a colleague.

To me, the church felt like a “dysfunctional family.” I discovered that some church folks lack the vocabulary for a healthy dialogue about mental health and addiction. I, too, believed I had the suitable terminology, yet my approach was excessively clinical, lacking any sense of spirit.

As a pastor, I yearned for a transformational approach. Embracing the term *dysfunctional family* allowed me to believe that my family and my church were the source of my chaos. That’s why I now prefer using *the wounded family* instead of *dysfunctional family*.

Untreated and misunderstood mental health conditions significantly impacted my family. These experiences drive my purpose in ministry and writing, compelling me to engage with and address these wounds.

Growing up Lutheran, my family appeared average at church. However, at home, denial was our way of life. Each family member struggled to be themselves and wore their own masks.

If my family was wounded, then the church must also acknowledge its


wounds. Our society demands radical change and reform in faith communities.

The call for mental health reform in the church reminds me of my family’s cries for help in crisis. Unfortunately, a historical institutional denial of mental health seems embedded in many faith communities. Churches exist in the shadow of a tradition of silence surrounding mental health, and “wounded families” yearn for spiritual rebirth.

Consider Jesus and how the wounds from the crucifixion are not concealed. As a pastor living with bipolar disorder, Christ’s unguarded nature is a call to be vulnerable. My hope is for “the wounded family” and all faith communities to strive to embody Jesus’s vulnerability.

The next time you ponder using the term “dysfunctional family,” reflect on these questions: Where are the wounded people in your family? Do they acknowledge their wounds? Have they healed? What do you need to do to find peace with others’ wounds?

Living in “the wounded family” is about peace—peace with your own wounds, peace with other’s wounds, and peace with the causes of those wounds.

Seeking peace within a process of acceptance, grace and forgiveness allows “the wounded family” to experience new life and to heal. 

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