

Conflict

So a young rabbi is in serious trouble!

During the Friday service, half the congregation stand for the prayers and half sit.

Each side shouts at the other, insisting that theirs is the true tradition.

Nothing the rabbi says or does solves the impasse.

Finally, in desperation, he seeks out the synagogue's 99-year-old founder.

He meets the old rabbi in the nursing home and pours out his troubles.

"So tell me," he pleads, "was it the tradition for the congregation to stand during the prayers?"

"Nooooo," answers the old rabbi.

"Ahhh," responds the younger man, "then it was the tradition to sit during the prayers?"

"Noooo," says the old rabbi.

"Well, what we have is complete chaos!

Half the people stand and shout, and the other half sit and scream."

"Ah," says the old man, "**that** was the tradition!"

I don't think we could have a more fitting gospel lesson for this time in our world.

Our political divide is as deep as it's ever been.

A president who proclaims law and order seems to delight in fanning the flames of racism and bigotry.

As the pandemic continues, government leaders struggle to find the right balance between personal liberty and public safety.

And as we finish up yet another shut down; folks everywhere are on edge.

Here at the church we are constantly hearing F bombs explode among those seeking food and shelter.

Nerves are on edge.

We are cross with one another.

Maybe you're feeling it in your home too.

And today's Gospel tells us: don't despair!

Whenever well-meaning people find themselves on a journey of great importance, conflicts will arise.

Indeed, conflict and love are two sides of the same coin in any community.

But the gospel doesn't just leave it there.

Instead, it gives us some concrete guidance on what to do.

First, by what it doesn't say.

It doesn't say ignore the conflict, hoping it will go away.

Nor does it say that one should simply walk away.

Instead, it puts the onus on the person who feels offended, angry or hurt.

It's up to that person to take the first step, and behind closed doors, go to the one who may have caused the offense, anger or hurt, and talk story.

Truth be told, most times that will bring the healing desired.

So long as the one who is approached will hear it from the other person's point of view.

So long as the one who does the approaching is willing to forgive.

If that doesn't work, then the resources of the community are brought to bear and every effort is made to find real peace.

More members are involved NOT to up the ante, but to see if more heads can find a solution, which sometimes means agreeing to disagree.

But more often than not, everyone is called to a deeper, more profound sense of who Jesus is, and who he calls us to become.

It's no easy task.

Today, if someone gets upset, especially in churches, folks just leave.

By one count, there are 33,000 Christian denominations worldwide!

How does that happen to the church Jesus calls to be One?

It happens because of nationalism and racism and me against you-ism.

None of which is the way of Jesus.

The way of Jesus asks us NOT to do the easy thing: just walking away from one another when there is conflict.

The way of Jesus asks us to dive into, and then through, the conflict.

This wasn't a theory with Jesus.

He had plenty of conflict with his followers.

Peter's called "satan".

John and James demand thrones next to Jesus in the kingdom.

Judas betrays him.

Yet through it all, when conflict happens, the truth of who God is comes striding to the fore.

Because ours is a God who goes out to "the other," to the lost, to the different.

Even to the enemy.

Even to you and me.

Which is why the good advice on conflict resolution ends with Jesus saying "if the recalcitrant fellow won't listen to the whole community, treat 'em like a tax collector or gentile."

But wait!

How does Jesus treat tax collectors and gentiles?

He loves them!

With Jesus, we can never wash our hands of anyone, because ours is a God who is always searching for the outcast.

This truth is woven throughout Matthew's gospel:

Jesus reminds us that our Father knows every hair on our head.

That God, like an anxious Mother, searches for the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost daughter and son.

And God does this freely!

Overflowing with love.

Mending, right here and now, your wounds and mine. Jeff Krantz & Michael Hardin (paraphrased).

Sometimes the hardest part is accepting this God who forgives.

It's almost easier to believe in a God of revenge or violence or retaliation.

Yet it is Jesus who explains time and again that violence, grudges and retaliation are not divine.

They are human.

And, left to fester, become demonic. Id. (Paraphrased).

Yet even still, so many struggle with this notion of a loving God.

A woman stopped by the church not long ago and showed me a deep surgical cut in her tongue.

It was in the shape of a star and it looked painful.

She had a cancer removed.

She was crying because someone told her the cancer was God's punishment, because in her youth, she was a prostitute.

And all I could think of was the prostitute who anoints Jesus with fine oil, and his loving response to her.

Today's gospel invites us to forgive generously, even in the most difficult of times.

As Saint Paul says to the Romans today:

"Owe nothing to anyone, except to love one another. . . "

Having begun with a story, perhaps I can leave you with one.

The one who tells it is Nelson Mandela:

"After I became president, one day I asked some members of my close protection to stroll with me in the city, and have lunch at one of its restaurants.

We sat in one of the downtown restaurants and all of us asked for some sort of food.

After a while, the waiter brought us our requests.

I noticed that there was someone sitting in front of my table waiting for food.

I told one of the soldiers:

Go and ask that person to join us with his food and eat with us.

The soldier went and asked the man.

The man brought up his food and sat by my side, as I had asked, and began to eat.

His hands were trembling constantly – until everyone had finished their food and the man went.

The soldier said to me:

The man was apparently quite sick.

His hands trembled as he ate!!

No, not at all, I replied.

This man was the guard of the prison where I was jailed.

Often, after the torture I was subjected to, I used to scream and ask for a little water.

This very same man used to come every time – and urinate on my head instead.

So I found him scared, trembling, expecting me to reciprocate now, at least in the same way, either by torturing him or imprisoning him as I am now the President of the State of South Africa.

But this is not my character, nor part of my ethics.

The mentality of retaliation destroys states – while the mentality of tolerance builds nations.”

Maybe this is what Jesus means when he gives us the great power to bind and unbind.

It's the greatest gift we can give one another.

My AA friends call it "the gift of a new day."

Wiping the slate clean for one another.

Starting fresh.

And we can do it.

Because, where only two or three are gathered, Jesus himself is there.

Quieting the discord of conflict.

And then gently, but firmly, weaving us back together.

Weaving the ties that bind.

And that, my friends, is our tradition.

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