

STEPS TOWARD RECONCILIATION

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Titus Presler, Priest Associate, in
Grace Church, White Plains, on the 17th Sunday after Pentecost, 7 September 2008
Year A, Proper 18: Matthew 18.15-20; Romans 12.9-21; [Ezekiel 33.1-11]

**Many years ago, during my student days in seminary, I was a summer chaplain at
a psychiatric hospital in Denver.**

I worked on a unit with patients who came in with a wide variety of psychiatric
conditions,
some of them extreme and others more ongoing.

***Psychodrama* was a mode of treatment that I found especially striking.**

Like regular theater, a psychodrama is partly unreal and artificial:

it's about a relationship, but only one person in the relationship is present,
and that person is pretending that the other person is there.

A psychodrama is very real, though, in the sense that the actor is not just playing a part.
No, the person is saying what he or she really wants to say from the heart.

She imagines that the other person is there
and says all that she wants and needs to say to that person.

I recall one psychodrama in which the patient was a woman who as a child had had a
very difficult relationship with her father,
who she felt had rejected and abandoned her.

Staff members had talked with her a good deal about this,
because they felt that her psychiatric problems were related to this history.

The father-daughter relationship was hard to resolve, though, because her father was
dead.

Finally the staff suggested she do a psychodrama on the relationship,
and she agreed.

So in an open space in the chapel, with the rest of the ward all gathered around,
she sat in a chair and talked out loud with her father,
who she – and we – all imagined was sitting in the chair opposite her.

Her words were stilted and halting at first,
but presently she began to talk more freely,

And then it all came tumbling out:

stories, anger, accusations, questions, longing, love, tears —
all things she had never been able to express for years.

Perhaps for the first time in her life

**she was going to the person she felt had sinned against her
and, in the words of Jesus, she was telling him his sin.**

*In the words of Paul, she was trying to overcome evil, not with evil, but with good,
the good of her longing to be close, the good of her yearning for reconciliation.*

Reconciling love –

that's a theme we hear about in today's scriptures.

In the reading from Paul's letter to the Romans the apostle breaks into an inspiring catalogue of what the Christian life should look like:

*"Let love be genuine,
be aglow with the Spirit, rejoice in your hope,
be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer" –*

But then he turns to the tough part:

**"Bless those who persecute you . . . Repay no one evil for evil . . .
if your enemy is hungry feed him . . . Overcome evil with good."**

This is where our love is tested –

not when things are going just fine,
but in the conflicts of life.

Our love is tested when we're at odds with someone else.

when we feel hurt and angry from something someone has done to us.

It may be something small like a careless comment in a social situation
that makes us feel ignored or devalued.

It may be a deliberate statement or action at work
that's opposed to what we think should be said or should happen,
something directly opposed to our interests.

It may be a long pattern of behavior in the family that distorts and damages
relationship:

neglect, unfaithfulness, abuse.

*Whatever the context, the result is a wounded relationship,
and the issue in the scripture is how to respond in a wounded relationship.*

Our first response often is to give back just what we've gotten:

a cutting remark gets us searching for an equally cutting retort;
someone's devious strategy at work prompts us to look for the move that
politically will deal the decisive blow;
and the hurts we receive at home *really* get us going —
"You hurt me, well, I'll hurt you back!"

And in neighborhoods? —

as a newspaper reporter, I used write up selectmen's meetings in the town of
Plymouth, Massachusetts, home of the Pilgrims,
and one of the most entertaining parts was dog complaint hearings:
conflicts about dogs brought the nasty out of people,
and it was remarkable to hear what petty things people had done to get back at
each other.

Tit for tat — we know it so well.

Hurts threaten us and make us feel insecure;

we want to restore our security and preserve ourselves by striking out and hurting
back.

It's just this instinct that Paul argues against:

**"Do not repay anyone evil for evil . . . but overcome evil with good . . .
If your enemy is hungry, feed him."**

**What Jesus provides in today's Gospel
is a concrete strategy for overcoming evil with good
through resolving conflicts and coming to reconciliation.**

"If a member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."

Jesus is giving advice about conflict resolution,
and this advice challenges the ways in which we respond to conflict.

First, Jesus challenges us to address conflict *actively*, not *passively*.

We all know the passive approach:

you hurt me, I get angry, but I don't express that anger;
instead, I nurse that anger into a slow-burning resentment that eats into our
relationship and corrodes my soul.

The patient in the psychodrama had probably let that happen to her relationship with
her father.

Fear is what keeps us from actively addressing conflict:

fear that what little security we have will be destroyed,
fear that the conflict will get worse rather than better,
fear that we will have to give up the sense of power that our anger gives us.

*Jesus is saying, No: If another person has hurt you,
take the situation in hand:*

don't sit there nursing your anger, but go to that person and talk about it.

Be active, not passive.

His counsel challenges us in a second way:

**Address conflict *personally*, not *indirectly*,
first-hand, not *second-hand*.**

We all know our common pattern:

person x does something that really burns me,
I don't go to x and talk about it,
instead I go to person y and talk to that person about what a terrible person x is
because x did such and so to me.

It makes us feel good,

because we get a lot of feelings off our chest,
and the people we confide in are usually people we can count on to sympathize,
so we get a lot of cheap, uncritical support.

But the second-hand approach doesn't get us closer to reconciliation.

If anything, it hardens our position, makes us harder to bend,

and makes us keener to save face with the friends in whom we have confided.

Fear, again, is what keeps us from going personally to the person who has wronged us:
fear of exposing myself as being vulnerable to being hurt,

fear of getting hurt even more,
 fear that if I'm right, I will have to forgive you,
 fear that if I'm wrong, I will have to seek your forgiveness.

Jesus' way is the active way, the personal way —

"If your brother or sister sins against you, go to that person and point out the fault,"

or, as the Jerusalem Bible puts it, "have it out with that person alone."

It's the tough way, but it's the only way that has a chance for reconciliation.

Third, Jesus challenges us to address conflict *communally*.

"If your brother or sister doesn't listen to you,
 take one or two others along with you,
 and if he or she still doesn't listen, take it to the community."

Jesus recognizes that sitting down with your adversary might not solve the problem:
 you might need to bring some other folks in on the situation.

Other people's perspective can be helpful:

sensitive listeners can help both sides see where they can bend
 and can help them reach toward reconciliation.

Fear, again, is the obstacle:

fear of sharing my problems with others,
 fear that the counsel of someone outside the situation will lead me to reconsider
 my hard-fought and, I think, hard-won position,
 fear that I'll lose the battle.

*Jesus is saying, No: The community has something to offer,
 the community can help you toward reconciliation.*

Yes, even that might not work,
 but we are called to use everything available,
 for **reconciliation is what God is calling us to in the Body of Christ.**

Active, Personal, Communal —

three ways Jesus challenges us to address conflict in our lives.

I witnessed a remarkable instance of this approach some years ago when I was back in Zimbabwe for a visit.

I had preached Sunday morning in the parish of a friend of mine and was told that after the service there would be a church council meeting.

I joined the meeting, expecting the usual discussions of finance and upcoming events. But no, this meeting had an unusual agenda.

It seemed that a widow in the parish had been in her round, thatched home one evening when a male relative had come knocking at her window and trying to get in, clearly with the intention of molesting her.

She had refused to open the door, and he had gone away, but the event had been ugly and traumatic for her.

Other relatives had urged her to go to court and seek damages,
 but she'd refused, saying she wanted reconciliation before the church.

So here she was, with some of her friends in support, and here was the offending cousin,

both of them before the church council.
 The whole story was recited in detail.
 The cousin was repentant, confessing in full.
 The widow was struggling, reaching to forgive.
 The meeting had all the advantages of a court,
 for the offense was being made public,
 and that was a powerful sanction against it happening again.
But it was better than a court,
for it was clear that reconciliation was in the making,
and everyone there left that place
amazed at the reconciling love of God they had witnessed.

In the conflict-ridden life of the Anglican Communion today the challenge of reconciliation has been engaged in some remarkable ways during the current communion-wide crisis.

Earlier this year, Trinity Church, Wall Street, sponsored a gathering of 65 American bishops and 65 African bishops,
 all of them in companion diocese relationships,
 for a week of conversation in Spain.
 No decisions, no resolutions, no major public statements –
 but all who were there testify to how being together helped them move not toward
 agreement but toward reconciliation in relationship –
 active, personal and communal.
 This year's Lambeth Conference had a similar effect:
 again no decisions, no resolutions, no major public statements,
 but the patient work of reconciliation –
 active, personal and communal.

Conflict is part and parcel of our lives,
 for we do hurt each other, sometimes terribly.

In the midst of our hurt, anger and conflict God has reached out to us in reconciling love through Christ.

As we receive that reconciling love of Christ in our lives,
 our love *can* be genuine,
 we *can* rejoice in our hope,
 we *can* be aglow with the Spirit.

**Out of that transformation we can receive strength
 to address the conflicts of our lives actively, personally, communally,
 and so invite the reconciling love of God
 in the hard stuff of living.**

May God give us the grace to reach out for the transforming gift of God in our lives.
 Amen.