

“Finding the Keys to Restoring Broken Relationships” CHC 9-10-17

Old Testament, Psalm 149:1-5

New Testament, Matthew 18:15-21

Conflict is inevitable. Nations posture, threatening the peace, evidenced in the rhetoric surrounding North Korea. People within families struggle to get along. Workplaces are often conflicted. Human nature possesses inimical tendencies. Scripture is replete with examples.

So it is not surprising that Jesus offers a path for individuals and communities to get along. Psalm 133:1 affirms, “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!” Isn’t that what we all want? However it is not that easy.

The other day I did something to offend Betty. She confronts me, saying, “Don’t you have something to say to me?” Not aware of what I had done, I respond, “What do you want me to say?” Wrong response. The dialogue did not move in a positive direction. Explaining what I had done, still defending my position as not having intended to commit the infraction and unjustly judged, I say, “Okay, I’m sorry”. She responds, “No, you’re not”.

She leaves the house for an errand. Both of us are angry at each other, not unhappy to depart from each other’s presence. As time passes I see she calls. I call back. We make peace, not about the issue, but to reestablish the integrity of the relationship. The relationship mattered more than whatever the argument was about.

Gottman and Levenson, psychologists, study the interaction between couples. They discover that most relational problems (69%) never get resolved but are ‘perpetual’ problems based on personality differences between partners. Betty and I certainly have different personalities.

Jesus lays out the process. Interestingly, the wronged party is to take the initiative. A conflict between two parties cannot continue without the participation of one or both. I have to decide if I want peace and reconciliation or not. Nations are no different.

For years, during the Vietnam War, the United States and North Vietnam were engaged in the Paris peace talks. Years were spent arguing over the shape of the conference table. Resolutions were introduced by both sides but each subsequently turned them down. Neither side showed an interest in peace as long as they thought they could do better on the battlefield. Such stall tactics were common (Homiletics, Sept.-Oct. 2017, p.17).

The first step, Jesus tells us, is to go to the other party. Work it out. If one refuses, the matter is no longer between two individuals. It becomes a community issue. If pride is involved, sin becomes more entrenched and a heart can become hard. The attitude of an individual or a nation poisons the atmosphere of community.

If that is the case, Jesus says, involve the community. Bring others into the conflict to assist in resolution. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God”, Jesus says.

As Shannon Alder writes, “Sometimes, God doesn’t send you into a battle to win it; God sends you to end it” (Homiletics, p.17).

Desmond Tutu, in his book, “No Future Without Forgiveness”, makes this observation. “Forgiving and being reconciled to our enemies or our loved ones are not about pretending that things are other than they are. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the hurt, the truth. It is a risky undertaking but in the end it is worthwhile, because in the end only an honest confrontation with reality can bring real healing. Superficial reconciliation can bring only superficial healing” (Tutu, p. 218, Homiletics, p.18).

The Apostle Paul writes, “My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:1-2).

But what if reconciliation becomes elusive, one party refusing to own up and work it out? This is where Jesus gets tough. That person becomes an outsider to the community, as a tax collector and a Gentile. One person is not allowed to poison the whole and is sent out to protect the integrity of the community. Happy endings are not guaranteed.

Lest we judge Jesus harshly on this, remember that the tax collectors and Gentiles were objects of mission. The motive of love and restoration of a relationship to the community is always central. In 2 Corinthians 2:5-11, Paul talks about a person who has been put out of the community for personal offense and unrepentance. At some point, he acknowledges that “This punishment by the majority is enough for such a person; so now instead you should forgive and console him, so that he may not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. So I urge you to reaffirm your love for him”.

The reality is that Christ is present with us through this process. “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them”. So present is Christ that he can say, “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven”.

Going back to 2 Corinthians, Paul says something similar; “Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ. And we do this so that we may not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his design” (verses 10-11).

As George Carlin writes, “May the forces of evil become confused on the way to your house”. The practice of Jesus’ love and forgiveness does just that.

Ultimately, as we practice grace with discipline in the context of our relationships, the destructive power of evil in life and relationships is denied. But it takes intentionality and work. Brennen Manning makes a good observation; “Suffering, failure, sorrow, discouragement, and death will be part of your journey, but the kingdom of God will conquer all of these horrors. No evil can resist grace forever”.

When we or another become estranged from the community of faith for whatever reason, inspired by Christ's grace and pursuant of mine or the other's 'lostness', there is always the possibility of being reconnected. Are we not most like Jesus when we listen and speak in love and truth? (Christian Century, 8-16-17, p.21).

"It is never a straight line to peace, quiet and harmony", as Edward Dowey notes. The reconciliation of Christ on the cross on behalf of the world is preceded by conflict. All of our efforts to restore relationships are imperfect and require intention and persistence through Christ's grace. It is the way we are obedient to the one who has reconciled us.

Hunter Farrell, missionary and former head of World Mission of our denomination, tells this story of his experience in Peru. Walking into the sanctuary of a church in the poorest of Peru's regions, "Pastor David did what I had never seen anyone in Peru do before: after inviting 50 or so people who had gathered for worship to stand in a circle, he took his Bible and placed it on the ground. Now, among indigenous folks in Peru, allowing the Word of God to touch the ground is a sign of disrespect".

Having the attention of the group, the pastor asks, "What is the one thing we must do each day to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?" A teenager answers, "We must follow Jesus every day".

Pastor David answers, "Yes, so everyone take a step toward the Living Word". All took that step. "What happened?" the pastor asked. Silence. After taking several steps toward the Bible all were now standing uncomfortably shoulder to shoulder.

The pastor then asks, "What happened?" Finally a young girl responds, "Pastor, we came closer together!"

Hunter Farrell said that "Suddenly, we began to understand" (Homiletics, p.18).