

Conflict and the Cross

Horrific violence consumed a Diamond Head neighborhood last Sunday.

It took the lives of an older woman and two young police officers, along with the rage filled man who did the killing and set the fires that consumed to ashes five homes.

In its wake is left a stunned community, with so many grieving for their lost loved ones and friends.

And while the talk has been about mental illness being at the root of this horror, perhaps closer to the truth is that unresolved rage really lit this match.

The 69 year old man apparently was at war with his neighbors for years and this last conflagration was set off by an eviction notice - an insistence that he leave and not come back.

Ironically, a world away in the land of professional football, as the Diamond Head homes were burning, the top two guys of the San Francisco 49ers were chatting away about what led to their success this year.

The sum and substance of it was that when they disagreed with each other, they made a pact never to ignore the disagreement, but to always face it, talk about it, and work through it, whatever the disagreement may be.

To sweep conflict under the rug, they agreed, was a recipe for long term disaster.

Human conflict is nothing new; what's new is what our faith says about how we deal with it.

The normal human response to conflict is to fight or flee.

Fight or flight is pretty much the way of the world, and we see it on display each and every day, from the most intimate family settings to our church communities to the world stage.

But Jesus offers another way, and as the readings unfold, we get a glimpse of the gift that conflict can be for us, if only we are willing to neither run away nor hit back.

We begin with Jesus calling his first four followers, the four who will become his closest friends, his dearest confidants, his most heartbreaking deniers, yet who will one day be transformed into fearless witnesses to the new thing God is doing in the world.

He calls them and in that calling, families are upended.

Old Zebedee scratching his chin, and maybe cursing too, as he watches his adult sons leave the family business forever.

Wives and children wondering and worrying what's next for them as dads leave home.

As lives are turned inside out.

".....because the kingdom of heaven doesn't exist to serve the family, the family exists to serve the kingdom; because the goal of the kingdom isn't to make us better at our jobs, but to help us see that our work matters only when it lines up with the will of this merciful, compassionate, God." Long, Matthew, 43, paraphrased.

Those lives being turned upside down are on full display in Corinth, where, as we see in Paul's letter today, baptism isn't a magic pill that cures what ails us, as the new community of newly baptized Christians is nearing civil war.

Allegiances and alliances are formed, showing us how easy it is for us to turn the church into a club, to exchange following Jesus for simply admiring Jesus.

For many, conflict is a bad thing.

But for we Christians, what we come to slowly discover as we grow into this community, is that conflict is not only inevitable, it is necessary to our transformation.

“What the heck is he talking about,” you may be wondering????

“Isn’t the Christian life all about peace and harmony, sister and brotherhood?????”

Well, yes and no.

“Yes” in the sense that that is the ultimate goal, that is the kingdom, that is the place we will one day be, by the grace of God.

But “No” in the sense that we don't get there without being thoroughly and completely and forever changed from the inside out.

“Unless you become like a little child, you cannot enter the kingdom of God....”, Jesus says.

Which means we must somehow return to a state of innocence, not by ignoring the things that have destroyed our innocence, but by confronting them, facing them, and then, finally, transforming them.

Truth be told, we cannot change without conflict: conflict with our egos, with our partners and with our enemies.

Here’s why.

Jesus comes to take away the sin of the world.

We say that every week.

We believe it, but often don't know what it means.

For some, sin is a crime to be punished, so Jesus takes the punishment in our place, making us right with God.

But what if sin isn't a crime, but a sickness?

A sickness that Jesus heals through his willingness to love us to death, to his death, on the cross?

The people of the Pacific islands knew a great deal about sin, about human brokenness, long before the missionaries arrived.

And they practiced the art of healing that brokenness for centuries.

It's an art that is rooted in self-giving, in self-surrender, and yes, in dying too.

In Hawaii it's called ho`oponopono.

In Chuukese, it's called omus omus.

In Tongan it's oni kotoa ki heni.

You know how it works.

Everyone gathers.

Hurts are expressed, angers shared, feelings vented, accusations made, defenses rise, excuses get made.

But eventually, as folks keep at it, excuses are let go, defenses come down and people begin the often excruciating task of looking at themselves, as egos are deflated, and healing begins.

Because everyone taking part is willing to hang on the cross for a time.

To suffer for the sake of the community.

To die, so that new life can begin again.

What my experience with ho`oponopono has taught me is that perhaps the roots of our conflicts are not found in anger or jealousy or greed, but the real roots of conflict grow out of hurt and woundedness and pain.

We all know people who were not provided proper love as children, and how often such people grow up to be loudmouths or bullies.

But the root of those behaviors is insecurity, the fear of not being worthy, a hatred of self.

And yet, when we summon the courage to face ourselves, when we do the hard work of reconciliation with one another, we are given a peace that passes all understanding.

So, where do we stand and what shall we do?

Paul tells us....

In the midst of all human conflict, there stands the cross.

As my best thinking bumps up against yours, its not power or money that saves us, it's the cross: which says that the only real way to life is through death.

Meaning the death of my ego, the death of “my way or the highway” attitudes.

Meaning the death that comes with gathering the courage to examine the sources of our head butting with one another.

Making the cross the place where conflicts are resolved means praying for our enemies, even when they engage in the horrors we saw last week at Diamond Head.

It means engaging in constant self-examination, refusing to return hate for hate or force with force, but trusting in the foolish wisdom of God.

A wisdom that requires turning the other cheek, walking the second mile, giving both coat and shirt.

As one fellow puts it:

The person who endures the shattering experience of forgiving, truly and tenderly, some awful wrong to himself, or some terrible wrong done to one he loves, that person shall understand the meaning of the cross better than all the theologians in the world.” Mackintosh, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness*, 193 paraphrased.

My dear friends, may you find that “the cross enlarges your soul until it can mourn and rejoice at the same time; until your soul can feel the world’s pain, and hope for the world’s healing, in a single heartbeat.” Id. 63, paraphrased.

+amen

