

Living Together

A young rabbi found a serious problem in his new congregation.

During the Friday service, half the congregation stood for the prayers and half remained seated, and each side shouted at the other, insisting that theirs was the true tradition.

Nothing the rabbi said or did solved the impasse.

Finally, in desperation, the young rabbi sought out the synagogue's 99-year-old founder.

He met the old rabbi in the nursing home and poured out his troubles.

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

"No," answered the old rabbi."

Ah," responded the younger man, "then it was the tradition to sit during the prayers?"

"No," answered the old rabbi.

"Well," the young rabbi responded, "what we have is complete chaos! Half the people stand and shout, and the other half sit and scream."

"Ah," said the old man, "*that* was the tradition."

Last week, one of our members gave me a St. Elizabeth's parish newsletter from February 1, 1956.

Fr. Shim, my role model, was the Rector.

The newsletter announced the birth of Dorothy Jung's third child, Randall and Bill Eng's appointment to the vestry.

There was also this announcement:

"Our newest parish organization is the Parish Council made up of the vestry and the heads of all organizations within the Parish. The function of the Parish Council is to coordinate the activities of the Parish so that *conflicts* may be eliminated."

And, I must say, I chuckled to myself, because clearly our church, like every other church for 2000 years, had conflicts in 1956 and of course we have conflicts in 2011.

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

Whenever well meaning people gather together on a journey of great importance, conflicts will arise.

We fail to communicate clearly or effectively.

I have certainly failed from time to time in that regard.

Some have a vision of who we are and what we should be that differs from the vision of others.

Sometimes, any one of us can be just out of it, or mad, or hurt.

And what today's lesson teaches is that all of that is part and parcel of any real community, perhaps especially any community that gathers together in the name of Jesus.

But the gospel doesn't leave it at that.

It gives concrete guidance on what to do.

First, by what it doesn't say.

It doesn't say ignore the conflict.

It doesn't say just hope it will go away.

Nor does it say that one should 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, the tremendous value the gospel puts on keeping the community alive and growing and real is poured out.

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 other heads can find a solution.

Sometimes that solution means agreeing to disagree.

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

This is no easy task today.

Today, if one gets mad at any organization or at people in the organization, especially churches, folks just leave.

That's the reason we have, and I'm not making this up, 6,272 Christian denominations in the United States alone!

(As of yesterday! Who knows what tomorrow will bring).

I once heard of a two stoplight town.

As you approach the town you see a sign out front of a church that reads, "The church of God".

On the next corner, at the first light, there is another church whose sign reads, "The true church of God."

At the next light, another church whose sign reads, "The one true church of God".

This is not the way of Jesus.

Just as he argues with his followers (calling Peter "Satan"; telling the two who want to be greatest that the greatest are those who serve; rejecting the crowd's efforts to crown him king), so Jesus recognizes that we too will, from time to time, argue with one another.

And when that happens, the truth of who God is comes striding to the fore.

Ours is a God who goes out to 'the other', to the lost, to the different.

God goes out even to the enemy, and to you and to me.

This truth is woven throughout Matthew's gospel:

The angel tells Joseph to name the child "Emmanuel," because it means, "God is with us."

Jesus reminds us that our Father knows the life story of every sparrow.

It is God, like an anxious Mother, who searches out the lost sheep, the lost coin, who searches out you and I when we wander away.

God is always and everywhere the God who goes out to the other, to the lost, to the stranger.

God does this freely, overflowing with love, mending, right here and now, your wounds and mine. Jeff Krantz & Michael Hardin (paraphrase).

The hardest part is getting our minds around this God who forgives.

It's hard to accept that God is not about revenge or violence or retaliation.

Yet it is Jesus who explains time and again that violence, and grudges, and retaliation, and licking one's wounds is not something divine: it is human, and, left to fester, can even become satanic. Id. (Paraphrase).

It is Jesus who takes me by the arm and says that if I teach 'the little ones' that there is a *limit to forgiveness*, that if *they don't behave -- they'll get theirs*; well, better that I should put a cement block around my neck and jump into Kaneohe Bay. Id. (Paraphrase).

Because that's not the way God is.

A woman stopped by the church last week 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 the tax collecting traitors whom Jesus eats with and welcomes; and all the lost that he comes to find.

I think of my personal foibles and failures.

I think of the structural sin that I participate in just by being a citizen of the First World, when so many Third World brothers and sisters watch too many of their children die; who see hope as nothing more than a distant mirage.

And I come to see that we have each of us been forgiven much.

Today's gospel invites us to forgive generously, even in the most difficult of times; those times when conflict tries to tear us apart from one another.

As Saint Paul puts it to the Romans today: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another. . . "

So, unlike our newsletter of 1956, where the hope was to "*eliminate conflict*," today we can perhaps come to see that conflict will always be around; what counts is what we do with it.

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

Francisco Cardinal was tortured by the Somoza government in the 1970's.

Brutally tortured.

After the revolution, he came face to face with the man who had done the worst of the torturing.

Cardinal approaches the man and shouts: "Now I shall take my revenge on you! Now -- it is my turn!"

The man trembles, expecting his life is over.

Cardinal comes straight to the man, face to face . . . and embraces him.

"I forgive you," he says.

"That is my revenge."

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

It is 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 chords of conflict; and then gently, but firmly, weaving us together, weaving the ties that bind.

And that, my friends, is our tradition.

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