

Dealing with conflict

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 10, 2017.

Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law. Romans 13:10

The core of Jesus' teachings is that all the commandments are summed up in the simple but profound truth of the golden rule to "love your neighbor as yourself." To respect our neighbor with the same respect we have and want for ourselves is at the center of what is right and just and good. Our neighbor in this context is anyone we encounter, stranger, friend, or family member. If we really know how to love and respect others as we love and respect ourselves, we are fulfilling all the law and commandments.

In today's gospel, Jesus teaches a step-by-step process of handling conflict among members of the Christian community. When you encounter offensive behavior, you go and tell them of the offense. If they listen and acknowledge the offense, you have healed the breach in your relationship. If you are ignored, the next step is to take someone with you to talk to the offender. If that doesn't work, you take it to the whole church. Having tried all avenues with no result, you have no choice but to move on with the hope of a possibility for a future opportunity to heal the breach in the relationship. Nothing need ever be lost forever.

When a serious offense occurs within the life of the church and all efforts at reconciliation have failed, the last resort is excommunication. This is when the offender is denied the sacraments of the church. Long ago, excommunication meant that a church member was virtually shunned by the entire community. This extreme measure is to preserve the fabric of the Christian community. The disciplinary rubric of the 1928 Prayer Book stated that the "open and notorious evil liver" should be advertised and not allowed to come to Communion until they have openly repented. (1928 Book of Common Prayer, page 85) It further stated that, if there is malice and hatred between two members, they are not allowed to receive Communion until they are reconciled. If one of them is repentant and the other is not, the penitent is admitted to Communion but the one who is stubborn is not. The Disciplinary Rubric in our present 1979 Book of Common Prayer states the same requirements except that the priest shall speak to the offender privately that they may not come to Communion until they have given clear proof of repentance and amendment of life. (1979 Book of Common Prayer, page 409)

Many years ago, I became aware of two elderly sisters who knelt at the altar each Sunday who had not spoken to each other in over half a century. It was over some trivial matter neither could recall. After hearing about it from one of the sisters, I spoke to the other one who went to her sister and they were soon reconciled. It was obvious that neither wanted the estrangement to go on any longer. Not long after that one of them died.

It is just as important to be forgiven of our own offenses, as it is to forgive others of theirs. We can be grateful for those who care enough to tell us if they were offended and upset. We would rather be spoken to directly rather than being badmouthed to everyone else. When you have been offended, the only one you should speak to is the one who committed the offense. It is best to be up front rather than be frustrating and manipulative in refusing to say why.

Our homiletics professor in seminary told us that if we never offend someone in our preaching, we aren't doing our job. When that happens, I take the initiative to go and speak to them and talk about why they are upset. I bring along a copy of my sermon if there is any discrepancy between what I said and what was heard. My clergy colleagues tell me that they just ignore it and don't follow up it. Though it may not change things, at least it may gain a certain respect for making the effort.

For all the teaching and preaching about forgiveness, people can be very unforgiving. To say that you can forgive, but not forget is really another way of saying that you refuse to forgive. When someone refuses to accept an apology, there is nothing that can be done about it. Making the effort is still important. When one is deeply hurt and offended, it is hard to forgive serious offenses, but there can be no inner peace without it. When you receive an apology, accept it with grace and let it go. Don't bring

it up again. When you are wrong, admit it and when you are right keep quiet! You have your own faults. You don't need to dwell on those of others. When you are working on your own faults you don't have time to dwell on those of anyone else

Some of the closest pastoral relationships I have are with those with whom we strongly disagreed. Because we talked through our differences our relationship was stronger for making the effort to understand each other.

Forgiveness and reconciliation maintain the integrity of the faith community. While it is commonly thought that you should fight fire with fire, it makes more sense to fight fire with water. The living water of God's grace overcomes evil with good. Reconciliation reconnects those with whom we are in conflict by listening and making the effort to understand and respect our differences. Breaking the cycle of anger is worth the effort.

There has been long standing resentment and anger on both sides over the issue of immigration. Rather than mass deportation of thousands undocumented immigrants born in this country, a more compassionate response is to provide a practical way for them to gain full citizenship. This would allow them to continue their lives as productive and law abiding citizens. By correcting the system, we can be an example for the rest of the world in fulfilling our vision as a more just society.