

Not My Fault

A man once found himself on a train between two ladies. In this instance it was an unpleasant experience as the two ladies argued incessantly about whether the window should be shut or open. The lady furthest from the window argued that she would die of heat stroke if it wasn't opened. The other said she would almost certainly catch pneumonia if it didn't stay closed. When the ticket inspector arrived the ladies appealed to him to adjudicate on the issue. Unfortunately he had no solution. Eventually the man spoke up. "First open the window. That will kill the one. Then close it. That will kill the other. Then we will have peace."

At the invitation of today's Scripture stories we are going to "wade in the waters" of peace by focusing on conflict. Many people have a concept of peace similar to the man in this story. For them peace is the absence of conflict. However this falls far short of the biblical vision. In Scripture peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of love, generosity and grace as the *transforming principle* of our relationships, acknowledging that to be in relationship guarantees conflict. These passages, other Scriptures and the stories of church and humanity invite us to see conflict as tool and opportunity for spiritual growth.

That doesn't mean we will ever like conflict or that conflict cannot be mismanaged, used as a tool for manipulation or done away with. It takes discipline to embrace conflict as discipline and as a gift, it moves past our "gut" reactions and responses, and invite and allow God to work and lead in each situation and circumstance.

First what is conflict? It is easy to point to the story of the yet to be born twins and recount the words of the mother, as captured in The Message: "the children tumbling and kicking inside her." Yet conflict is also a major player in the parable told by Jesus, for even those seeds sowed on good soil had to contend with the weeds, sun, gravel and pressure from "the evil one". It is in the ability of plants rooted in good soil to contend with these "conflicting elements" which allows for a bountiful harvest.

Conflict, at its simplest, is when two or more – whatever – persons, ideas, beliefs, goals, etc, come into collision or disagreement. It results whenever there is contradiction, variety, or opposition. Conflict is when there is a "clash". And clash we, and the world, do. When the expectation is that conflict in and of itself can be avoided, we create deeper conflict with God and with others. When conflict, in and of itself, is viewed as a negative, never should happen, avoid-at-all-costs *sin*, then conflict is intensified.

In order to place love, generosity and grace as core principles in our relationships, with God, others and with self – yes, conflict is an aspect of our relationship with self as deeply as with any other – we must be willing to look deep within ourselves, guided by the Holy Spirit. Only then will we have the insight and strength to move past our human wills and personality and invite God to work transformation in us through our conflicts.

This is an invitation and process which is far greater than what can be covered in one morning's ponderings, it is more than a mental acceptance or exercise. It is, as Paul wrote, the working out of our own salvation, with fear and trembling. It is necessary for this and all communities of faith to talk about, work out, and develop healthy attitudes and methods of confronting conflict if they are to grow in spiritual maturity and develop the good soil necessary for a good harvest of lives lived in relationship with God.

That is the challenge and invitation these passages have brought to my heart. That each of us, and all of us together, be willing to face, talk about, work through and learn from our ways of reacting to conflict. There are a few beginning thoughts, seeds so to say, I would like us to begin with.

Conflict is one thing; each individual encounter which creates conflict is something wholly other. Conflict regardless of its cause is emotional, personal, relational and shakes our identity and sense of self. Conflict for most is an unpleasant experience and so often we react to the conflict rather than the source.

Conflict can bring out the best or worst in us. Competition, self-righteousness and judgments frequently arise from reacting to conflict. Conflict can cause us to see situations and persons as winners and losers, and who would ever choose to be the loser? The story of Jacob and Esau and the conflict over the birthright is a classic story of conflict badly managed and highlights one of the first questions which can be addressed to move into healthy conflict resolution. Neither Jacob or Esau truly had the power or authority to change the reality of Esau being first born and thereby the recipient of the majority of their father's wealth, authority and power. It was not this "stewing" story which resulted in Jacob receiving what was to be Esau's that comes later. Neither seemed to accept the fact that the only one who had power of the birth right was their father, to accept reality, to know and name what can be worked on or out between two or more vs. what is beyond either's control, narrows and defines what can be dealt with.

If we commit to first naming and accepting the realities over which we have no control, or perhaps truly wouldn't want to change, we can support one another in dealing with the feelings those realities bring without allowing deep and divisive conflict to grow. Conflict that results from our basic differences can often become acceptable when we step back and acknowledge that our experience is not universal. The two ladies in our opening illustration (remember the train and windows) didn't seem willing to compromise because neither could accept that their "cold" could truly be another's "hot." Jacob fought for that which Esau was willing to give flippantly away because neither saw the meaning of it through the other's eyes.

To be a community of faith which provides good soil for faith to grow, we must be willing to say there are times when we can agree, times we can agree to disagree, and times when we can help one another to accept and work in the midst of the disagreeable. In naming and working through feelings of conflict, in moving past our emotional reactions into the hard and courageous work of honestly and clearly articulating our feelings and

needs, of sitting down and listening to those we are in conflict with, of looking openly at our own role in the conflict, of naming what we can have control or effect on and what is beyond us, of approaching others with a sense of empathy, openness and respect for their perspective, and of refusing to paint another as bad, evil, wrong, or without value, God will work in and through us.

Conflict will not disappear, yet it will no longer have the power to divide or paralyze us. We can become more fully one in Christ and discover creative, God led ways to work and grow through even the deepest of conflicts, such as shown through this closing illustration:

Alexandre Dumas wrote the books *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*. It is said that Dumas had an ongoing quarrel with a rising young politician. It became so intense that a duel to the death was inevitable. There was one significant problem - both men were superb with a gun, so good in fact that a duel would almost certainly mean both men finding their target and both men dying. A solution was found - they drew lots, with the loser agreeing to shoot himself. Dumas lost, and with his gun in his hand, withdrew to another room and pulled the door shut behind him. Shortly after the door shut, a gunshot was heard, and the gathered crowd ran to the door. When they opened it Dumas stood in front of them, smoking revolver in hand, and said, Gentlemen, a most regrettable thing has happened. I missed."