

St. Bartholomew's Anglican Church
2368 Eggert Road, Tonawanda, NY 14150
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“Discipleship: Restoring Broken Relationships”

Pentecost 12; Proper 18A

Fr. Richard Molison

Two men who lived in a small village got into a terrible dispute that they could not resolve. So they decided to talk with the town sage or wise man. The first man went to the sage's home and told his version of what happened. When he finished, the sage said, "You're absolutely right." The next night, the second man called on the sage and told his side of the story. The sage responded, "You're absolutely right." Afterwards, the sage's wife scolded her husband. "Those men told you two different stories and you told them that they were absolutely right. That's impossible! They both can't be absolutely right." The sage turned to his wife and said, "You're absolutely right."

Conflict is inevitable in all aspects of life. George Barton, a Baptist pastor, writes: Conflict began the day you were born. Throughout your life, your selfish nature will be in conflict with every other selfish nature on earth. Conflict with your parents in those first few weeks may cause them to wish they could send you back to the hospital. At birth, you already may be found in conflict with the family. Read the story of Jacob in Genesis 29 and 30.

If a single birth isn't enough, double the trouble, birth of twins. An international conflict which lasted for centuries started in the womb of Isaac's wife Rebekah (Genesis 25 and others).

Have you wished for a brother? Remember, the first brother who was born killed his brother, Cain killing Able. In a sense, this was a war over religion, a war that continues right to the present, the most important war in history.

If you do not have any brothers or sisters, then go out and play with the neighborhood kids. That will get you into all sorts of conflicts. And if that doesn't produce enough conflict, then get your parents involved in your conflicts with the neighborhood kids.

Grow up enough to go to school. That will probably get you into all sorts of conflict with your parents, teachers, and a whole new set of friends and enemies.

When you are old enough, invite Jesus into your life. This will involve you in a new way of conflict with Satan, and with the principalities and powers and rulers of the darkness of this world.

And if that isn't enough for you, get baptized and join a church. This may cause conflict in your family. And it is sure to get you involved in a whole new sphere of religious people with whom you can have conflict.

Join the work force where conflicts are legion and legendary. And if you still haven't had enough conflict, volunteer to become a teacher, a pastor, or a missionary in a hostile foreign land.

If you still have not had enough conflict, get married! Still want more conflict, have children! Try leading them to Christ. And if your children grow up, marry and leave home, try influencing them or their spouses for God. And, if in the course of all the conflicts, your spouse dies, get married again and repeat the process!

Pastor Barton concludes this passage by saying that on the other hand, if you just do not want conflict, then don't care. Don't care about yourself. Don't care about anyone else. Because, as soon as you start to care, you will be involved in conflict.

Our Gospel message this morning deals with conflict resolution and how to achieve it. You know, the Amish achieve conflict resolution with the practice of shunning; that is the practice to ignore, to turn away from, or avoid the disciplined individual. When a person is disciplined by the Amish community, relationships are severed between person and children, or brother and sister, or even husbands and wives. Because the Amish are so isolated from those outside their faith, and their economic well-being is directly related to their involvement in the community, shunning is an especially cruel punishment. Shunning condemns the shunned to a life of lone deprivation. That person is effectively isolated.

"Ah, that's just the Amish," you may say. But how often have you heard others say when involved in a dispute, "I am never going to speak to that person again!" And they are quite serious about what they are saying! Isn't such language and action a form of shunning? Isn't such action and attitude fostering and advocating *broken* relationships rather than working hard to restore them? What happens to relationships in a faith community – the church – when real harm is done by one person against another? Our tendency is to complain much to anyone who will listen, but do nothing. Jesus, however, says that this is not the way to resolve disputes and lays out a process which has *restoration* of broken relationships as the goal.

In the mid-east, in-group vs. out-group, honor vs. shame, are critical components to the culture. "Sin" is an interpersonal offense, that is, sin endangers and jeopardizes relationships between people. It is never to be forgotten that sin also is an offense to God, but that is not our focus for this morning. In societies such as the Mid-east where honor is the core value, it is very easy to sin against another, to offend another's honor.

If someone thinks another person has shown him dishonor, the offended party is advised to confront the sinner *in private*. The reason for this privacy is to avoid placing the suspected offense within the official arena of the public eye. If the perception of dishonor has been mistaken, or the alleged dishonor unintentional, the conflict has been successfully defused in private. No one has lost face. Relationships restored. One's honor remains intact.

The second strategy is to take along two or three negotiators or witnesses. Now the situation becomes semi-private. The source of this strategy is rooted in the Old Testament Book of Deuteronomy 17. The witnesses are fully aware of their role and the consequences of bearing false witness. Where have we heard that we are not to bear false witness? (The 9th C.) Whatever these two or three negotiators decide is legally binding. The hope is that the negotiators or witnesses will succeed where

individual efforts failed. Honor must be repaired and restored in order to avoid the next step.

The final strategy now fully engages the cultural values of honor and shame. The matter now is presented to the community of the faithful, the church. The event has become fully public and publicized. In matters of honor and shame, the church is the final intercessor. If the offended chooses to disregard the faithful community's judgment, the consequence is excommunication. To be considered as a "Gentile or tax collector" is to be designated as an outsider. And with this designation comes shame, not only upon the individual, but also upon his family.

The force of excommunication is foreign and lost on the American individualistic culture that has little allegiance to any group, and sadly, that includes family. Americans prefer to "go it alone," "Do it my way," "see if I care," for "I gotta be me!" To such ideology, Jesus responds with, "You gotta be like me." For our Mediterranean ancestors in the faith, such individualistic ideologies were not a part of the culture. For, without community, one is effectively dead. One has no network, no support, no hope. Are we not seeing this community breakdown in our nation today?

In this morning's Gospel, Jesus says to us that if anyone sins against you, you are to spare no effort to make that person admit his fault, and to get things right again between you and that person. We are always to work towards reconciliation, to make right one's relationship with each other. Basically, Jesus says we must never tolerate *any* situation in which there is a breach of personal relationships between us another member of the church. Don Shula, the former coach of the Miami Dolphins, was talking to a reporter about a player's mistake in practice. Coach Shula said, "We never let an error go unchallenged. Uncorrected errors multiply." The reporter asked, "Isn't there benefit in overlooking one small flaw?" Shula asked, "What is a small flaw?"

Suppose something does go wrong, what are we to do to put it right? We are to follow what has been in practice for more than two thousand years. If we feel that someone has wronged us, we should go to see that person privately. If we have a difference with someone, there is only one way to settle it - and that is face to face.

Last night after the 4:30 service, a parishioner stated that this first step is most difficult to do. I agree. Personal pride has no place in this first step. It takes courage and spiritual strength to make this all important first move. Required is much prayer before making that first gutsy move. I know. Been there. Done that. Several times.

If a private personal meeting fails, and it may, we are to take some person or persons with us to the affronted person. The taking of witnesses is not meant to be a way of proving one has committed an offense. It is meant to facilitate the process of reconciliation, to *restore* relationships. To talk matters over with some wise, kindly and gracious people present is to create a new atmosphere in which there is at least a chance that we will see ourselves as other see us. The Rabbis had a wise saying, "Judge not alone, for none may judge alone save One - that is God."

If this second strategy fails, we are to take our troubles to the Christian fellowship, the church. Why? The Church is in an atmosphere of Christian prayer, Christian love,

and Christian fellowship, an atmosphere in which wronged personal relationships may be righted.

We now come to the most difficult strategy. When all has been done, when the sinner is given every opportunity to repent, yet remains stubborn and unyielding, we then may begin to think that this person is no better than the Gentile or Tax Collector and ought to be removed from the offended community. But this is not an opportunity to abandon anyone. Instead, we are challenged to win this individual with the love that can touch even the hardest of hearts, the love of Jesus Christ, our Lord. This is the very heart of the message we heard from the letter of Paul to the Romans. We are to feed those who offend us, we are to give them something to drink if thirsty, We are to bless those who persecute us; to bless, not curse them, for as soon as we curse them, then we join them. Abraham Lincoln said, "Do I not conquer my enemy by making him my friend?" Jesus found no person completely hopeless; neither should we. If we are to be with Jesus, then we must be among the people *he* chose to be with - sinners, Gentiles, and yes, even the much hated tax collectors.

We heard this morning the word of God as spoken through the Prophet Ezekiel saying, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live." We will go a long way towards healing broken relationships when we remember these words, and take the initiative in dealing privately with those who sin against us, or when necessary, with witnesses. And when we come right down to it, life is too short for grudges and vindictiveness, too precious for us to nurture bitterness and to be unforgiving.

There is a story about three umpires having a spirited conversation. The rookie said, "Some are balls, some are strikes. I call 'em like I see 'em." The older umpire said, "Some are balls and some are strikes. I call 'em like they are." The old veteran umpire said, "Some are balls and some are strikes. But they ain't nothin' till I call 'em." When our children were in school sports, well, to put it politely, I did not always agree that an umpire's word was final.

Only God's Word is final and perfect! And we heard this morning His Word stating there *is* an appropriate way to deal with conflict. We can't always mend our fences, we can't always make peace with those who offend us, but we *are* to try. Jesus has given us a process, a method, with the expectation that we will use it. And when we fail, and we will, we still are to love those who offend us as much as we love ourselves.

Now to God, who forever is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.