

If At First You Don't Succeed Try, Try Again
Cooke's-Portsmouth

September 10, 2017

Matthew 18:15-20

There was a church where the pastor and the minister of music were not getting along. As time went by, this began to spill over into the worship service. The first week the pastor preached on commitment and how we all should dedicate ourselves to the service of God. The music director led the song, "I Shall Not Be Moved." The second week the pastor preached on tithing and how we all should gladly give to the work of the Lord. The director led the song, "Jesus Paid it All." The third week the pastor preached on gossiping and how we should all watch our tongues. The music director led the song, "I Love to Tell the Story."

With all this going on, the pastor became very disgusted over the situation and the following Sunday told the congregation that he was considering resigning. The musician led the song, "Oh Why Not Tonight?" And it came to pass, the pastor did indeed resign. The next week he informed the church that it was Jesus who led him there and it was Jesus who was taking him away. The music leader led the song, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus"

It goes without saying that there is no conflict of wills or ego between our Director of Music, Darrell and myself, despite my propensity to tease him and you about the possibility. In fact, this congregation enjoys a reasonably conflict free reality. We do not all agree on everything, but for the most part, we disagree with respect and trust one another to have the best interest of the community and the structure in which we meet as priority. But conflict is a part of daily life,

career and most organizations and from the genesis of the church, serious attempt has been made to recognize its inevitability and to instruct members on how best to deal with it.

The passage from Matthew 18:15-20 was intended to give the early church guidance about how to deal with conflict and broken relationships. It outlines a very detailed process in how to deal with the problem of conflict and the desired and hoped for outcome of reconciliation. The first step is to request a face to face conversation where there should be both conversation and active listening between both parties. If this fails to address the issues then there is a second step that includes taking two more representatives of the congregation: elders or perhaps members of the M and P committee in our reality. Now there are four sets of ears: and two sets that are intended to be objective and offering witness for both parties involved in the conflict. If this does not lead to a satisfactory resolution then the entire congregation is to be involved. And if after serious and intentional conversation the rift cannot be healed then the parties can admit that maybe reconciliation is not possible.

The process may seem onerous and undesirous but I think that the larger point is fairly simple to understand if difficult to enact: if at first you don't succeed then try, try again. Too often we give up after one attempt; sometimes no attempt is made at all. People leave the circle of community all of the time. Sometimes we notice. Sometimes we discuss it among ourselves when someone has been absent for a while. More often than not we do not acknowledge the elephant in the room. We reason that since we are a voluntary organization that persons can volunteer to cross the threshold and they can stay at home.

Few of us like conflict. And when conflict emerges in the church it causes deep and sometimes irreparable wounds. And so we have become quite comfortable with being conflict deniers. We bury our heads in the sand and pretend that all is well. But conflict unchecked often festers and grows. And as the gospel reminds sometimes the end result is not the desired result. Sometimes people who have been offended and hurt refuse to budge.

Refuse to confess their complicity.

Refuse to be reconciled.

They point fingers at the offending party and want to be exempt from any involvement or complicity. One of the simple adages that I heard from my father's lips when there were issues between siblings has not left me: When you point a finger at someone else there are three pointing back at the one doing the pointing. All have made errors in judgement: acted when it may have been more prudent to remain idle; engaged the lips before firing up the brain; and unable to truly and honestly move beyond a hurt or disappointment. Sometimes even trying to shore up support by gossiping behind closed doors and the backs of the one who has failed or disappointed. Let the one who is without sin cast the first stone.

Martin Niemöller (1892–1954) was a prominent German Protestant pastor who emerged as an outspoken public foe of Adolf Hitler and spent the last seven years of Nazi rule in concentration camps. Niemöller is perhaps best remembered for the quotation:

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Trade Unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

From the time that Jesus walked and talked and when the gospels were being crafted for posterity it is implicit that conflict is inevitable and perhaps even unavoidable. We can turn a blind eye and a deaf ear; we can bury our heads in the sand and decry that it is not my problem but there is the text in Matthew's gospel the 18th chapter that implies the possibility: if another member sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If that member listens to you, you have regained the one. But-and herein lies the rub as with most but!- if you are not listened to then take a second step and a different tack. If at first you do not succeed at reconciliation then try again. And Again. And again.

Wab Kinew has written in his book, *The Reason You Walk*, about his metamorphosis and that of his father. His father was a student in a residential school who was brutalized and terrorized. His ill treatment at the hands of those entrusted with his care had a profound effect upon him, resulting in a time of alcohol abuse and deep seated anger. Over time he began to confront his demons and was reconciled with his past and his family and developed a commitment to making the future better for survivors and for Aboriginals. He shared his story of abuse and survival with his family and others.

They worked tirelessly to exact an apology from the Government of Canada for abuses in schools and the government action to annihilate the aboriginal culture by removing all memory of it from the children. This eventually took place in the House of Commons in June, 2008. In response to the apology he and others were invited to Rome where the then pope, Benedict could

also offer an apology. In Rome, Ndede had the opportunity to meet the Archbishop of Winnipeg. Upon returning home Wab's father began attending mass and invited the Archbishop, James Weisberger to join him and discuss the ways to further advance the reconciliation process in Canada. The Archbishop joined him for lunch and embraced some Indigenous rituals and practice.

He learned to do the Sundance and listened as many survivors shared their stories of shame, abuse and anger. He listened and nodded and offered no excuses or explanation. The Archbishop sat in the garb of a sun dancer with indigenous chiefs and participants while each prayed for their own community and their work towards reconciliation. As their mutual respect deepened and the pain and suffering was listened to and acknowledge the elder Kinew had an epiphany. He would adopt the Archbishop as his brother.

He wanted to form a lasting bond between two families and two communities. It is considered a peace keeping ceremony as individuals, families and communities are asked to set aside their differences and commit to reconciliation. It is hard to hate someone when you take them as a brother or sister.

Members of the Catholic Church community, family and aboriginal community attended. The ceremony included many aboriginal ritual, smudging and smoking the pipe. The archbishop was presented with a handmade blanket that bore many symbols sacred to the native community. He placed it around his shoulders on top of his black, clerical shirt and joined in the dance. Writes the younger Kinew: There are few times in your life when you have seen the impossible become possible. I witnessed such a thing in that moment. My father, the architect of the day stood just to

the side with a smile on his face, happy to stand near the spotlight rather than occupy it himself.
(The reason you walk p 132).

The reconciliation would not have been possible without the participants actively listening to the whole story- with all of its shame and ingloriousness. It would not have happened if the circle of participants had not been made larger by individuals: elders, fellow empathizers and warriors for truth and just and two communities willing to allow their circles to intersect at a point.

On what many view as the first Sunday of routine following the summer lull this is a significant text to ponder as we go forward to celebrate the unfolding liturgical year. Fall. Advent.

Christmas. Lent. Easter and Pentecost. In community of two or three gathered together and in large gatherings may hope, love, reconciliation and the name and word of Christ be paramount.
Amen.