



LESSONS for LIFE

August 31, 2008 11:00am

CONFLICT

A WAY THROUGH

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SACRED READINGS

Lesson: PSALM 115: 9-11

Gospel: MATTHEW 18: 15-17, 20

Being honest for just a moment or two, how many of you know of someone that you find very irritating? (Laughter in the congregation as hands are raised) How many of you have some conflict you need to deal with? How many of you have some people that you would call difficult people that you have to contend with? John raised two hands at 9 o'clock this morning. (Laughter)

You know there are lots of books out there about how to deal with conflict that do a much better job than I could ever do at talking to you about the different kinds of conflict and how to respond to each type. And there are lots of books out there also that will tell you how to deal with difficult people that will describe the different kinds of individuals and different responses that are appropriate for the different types of individuals. But as people of faith, as people who believe that spirituality matters what does our faith say to us about dealing with conflict? What does it say to us about dealing with difficult people? Are we to deal with it differently than the books tell us? You know, most of those books begin by talking about "the other". They begin by talking about "that difficult person" and their characteristics or they begin by talking about a particular kind of conflict and how to handle the person or how to motivate the person to be different. How to change "the other" or, if all else fails, how to manipulate the other person or the situation in order to be more in line with what we want. And yet, our faith calls for a different kind of response. And in the best MCC Toronto tradition we are challenged, not to begin with the other, the difficult person, not to begin with the situation, the conflict in front of us, our faith says we are to start with ourselves and not the other.

You know, it would be much easier if it wasn't so. It would be much easier to blame someone else that's the problem person or to blame some conflict situation. It would be much easier to look outside. Yet our scriptures say to us, why are we worrying about the speck in someone else's eye when we have a plank in our own? Our scripture calls for us to begin here and not there when it comes to dealing with conflict and when it comes to dealing with difficult people. If it is true that the earth is a classroom, then you are your own class project. How we deal with conflict and how we deal with difficult people begins here.

So this morning I want to talk about five key steps in dealing with conflict or in dealing with difficult people. The number one step: Work on your own stuff. You know as we take a look inside ourselves and as we take a look why are we triggered by certain types of people? What is it about certain kinds of conflict that really gets us going? Instead of blaming, take a look. What is that triggering in me? And as we work on our own stuff and as we create a positive environment around us, as we change the atmosphere around us, then we will approach conflict very, very differently.



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Secondly, realise how much you have in common with that difficult person. You know last week when I put up the chart about who we really are and inside that large circle I talked about - at our essence we are created in the image of God. The essence of who we are is love and peace and joy and that we've been given a spirit of power and love and self control. All of that is the essence of who we are. Now surrounding that there's some packaging that differs with each of us and in that packaging sometimes, there may be situations when we're at odds with someone else who has a different kind of packaging on the outside. It may be that even some of those things about other people are very irritating. Not just to us, but maybe to most people around us. But when we realise that everything within that circle we have in common with the other person, then that will help us to see them less as the problem person.

Thirdly, give some space for brokenness. You know each of us has our own little quirks. Each of us may be experienced something in the past that causes us to react in a certain way because of some brokenness. For me, I've always had an extreme irritation when there's something I can't do and when someone kind of pushes me aside to do it instead of teaching me how to do it because that is the way my Dad did things. My Dad would point out things that I didn't know, like how to fix a certain part of an engine of a car when I didn't quite know where the engine was in the car. (Laughter) So instead of helping me to learn how to do something he would kind of push me aside in disgust and do it himself. So for the first many years that John and I were together John, with his great knowledge of computers and my with my no knowledge of computers, there'd be something I'd be stuck on and John would realise it would be a lot faster just to fix it - push the button - than to explain it to me. So he would do it and I would get really irritated till I realised where that was coming from. And if we can see that in ourselves and we can see in ourselves our own brokenness or something in the past triggers something, then give other people that benefit of the doubt as well. Give space for the brokenness in others so that you approach the conflict, you approach that difficult person with more compassion and more understanding.

Now those first three steps make sense. Relatively easy: work on your own stuff, realise how much you have in common and give space for brokenness. The fourth step may be the challenge for some of us more than others maybe. The fourth step: don't create drama. (Laughter) As I was preparing this sermon I asked John for advice on how to deal with difficult people and he pointed out to me that the phrase "Drama Queen" probably has something based in reality for our communities, but don't create drama. Many times when we have a conflict or there is someone with a little edge to them, a difficult person, we end up inflaming the situation because of the drama we create.

So here are some hints to avoid creating drama. Don't engage the situation if you don't have to. Just let it go. Don't react to every situation or every person, just smile sweetly and say within yourself "God, bless you." Or as Robert Schuler is known to say, "God loves you and I'm trying to." (Laughter) Just say that silently to yourself and don't engage the situation and don't necessarily think you even have to engage the person. Just let it go.

Secondly, don't create drama. Don't exaggerate. Our mind has an amazing amount of power over us physically and emotionally. And what we do, I don't think I'm alone here so don't leave me stranded, I don't think I'm alone here when there may be a situation where - let's say there's someone who's always pointing out your faults and you see them coming. In your brain you say, oh here they go again they're going to mention this, they're going to mention this and they're going to mention this. You know what happens? When you think that in your mind your subconscious is experiencing that just as if the person did it. So you're exaggerating the situation, you're compounding the negativity of what that



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person may not even be going to do because in your mind you're exaggerating the situation. Don't create drama.

Don't spread negative news. The book of Proverbs in the Bible says one of the worst things we can do is to steal someone else's reputation, even with the truth. Steal someone else's reputation. Don't spread the negativity about how that person may be difficult or how that situation may be difficult. Don't create drama. Don't demonise the other person. Give them space to grow and change. Focus on the good.

A few months ago I had to make a trip to Montreal and I was travelling with a friend. About five hours drive and after about the first hour he started to irritate me and I thought oh lordy, lordy, lordy this is going to be quite the trip. Then I realised one of the books that I was reading it says when you focus on the negative it grows so instead focus on the positive. I thought about all the wonderful things about my friend and you know what happened? That irritating characteristic began to shrink. It became less and less and less important.

We can create drama by dwelling on the challenging piece or we can lessen the drama by focusing on the goodness of the person or the situation. Work on your own stuff. Realise how much you have in common. Give space for brokenness. Don't create drama. And finally, if you must engage the situation, if it's unavoidable that the conflict or the difficulty has to be addressed, then engage that situation. It could be with a family member or a co-worker or a volunteer or a staff person here at church. Then there are some very clear things our faith says to us. If we must engage, the gospel reading this morning tells us to deal direct with the person. Don't go to all kinds of other people first. Go and deal directly with the person and if that doesn't work, then find one or two other folks who can help you with it. Not to gang up, but who can help you with it because Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered there am I in the midst of them." So you're trying to find someone else to go in that spirit of Christ with you to help to resolve the situation. Our scripture says to us to speak the truth in love. So if you need to engage someone, think ahead of time about how you're going to approach it. What is the loving way to approach it? If you're not able to approach it lovingly, then either let it go and don't approach it at all or wait for awhile.

There's sometimes when I get really angry about something and I know this is not the best time for me to deal with it. And so I have to just step aside and leave it for awhile so I can think it through and so a little bit of healing can come. So then I can approach it in a loving way. Speak the truth in love. Approach it with compassion. Approach it with a spirit of forgiveness. And until you are able to do those things wait and work on your own stuff.

The reading from the Psalm that Rosemary shared this morning three times in the reading the Psalmist says, "God is our help and our shield." We're not facing these difficulties alone. We're not having to wrestle with the challenges of life or the irritation of another person alone. We enter all of these situations as spiritual people, image of God, presence of God in us, presence of God through us for our world. So I would just encourage you when you have some conflict to deal with or when you're dealing with a difficult person to think through about working on your own stuff. Give some space and some room for brokenness. To realise how much you have in common, to not create drama and to approach the situation, if you must, with a spirit of love and compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation.



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This week I guarantee you someone is going to irritate you. This week you're probably going to be faced with a difficult person. May you face those situations with more compassion.

Amen.