Conflict and Reconciliation

Narrative Lectionary - Lent 1

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Matthew 18: 15-35 Russell Mitchell-Walker

We are all familiar with conflict. Some of us fear it, some of us avoid it, some of us thrive in it, although we may not admit it. I know that my dad often initiated conflict with my mom and I mostly around political and social justice issues. He would say something that was borderline offensive and we would be off to the races on him. Later in our life together, especially after Brian was in our lives we realized that he was doing it on purpose as he would make one of these outrageous comments, and we’d be challenging him, and then he’d wink at Brian. We learned that he was doing it to help himself sort out what he really thought about these issues. So some of us enjoy or use conflict to help us sort out our thinking or engage in change. It is when we fear and avoid conflict that we get ourselves into trouble. I know that this is my problem – I can avoid facing issues and conflict, which too often leads to even more difficulties and challenges. For me it has often been easier to help people deal with their conflict with others, than face conflict I’m experiencing. Conflict is a reality of life, we cannot go through life or be in relationship with others, or with a community and be without conflict. The question is how do we ensure it is healthy conflict we engage in when we face it? Jesus knew about this challenge for us, which is why he addresses it in the passage today. He talks about dealing with it and facing it. He lays out some very practical guidelines for healthy conflict and assures us that wherever two or three are gathered, he is there. As we look at the whole passage, we also see that it is about forgiveness and reconciliation.

This week we enter the season of Lent, the 40 day period where we reflect on Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem, and what we need to do to improve our life, our relationship with Jesus and with one another. As we move into this season we are invited to examine the challenges of our past and our history as we explore issues reconciliation through a Lenten liturgy of reconciliation that I developed with a team of colleagues who were taking the program called Deepening Understanding for Intercultural Ministry a few years ago. The liturgy reflects on the Calls to Action from the report of Truth and Reconciliation Commission that relate to the church. In Jesus’ time, forgiveness was about right relationship. We move toward right relationship and reconciliation when we can forgive and right the wrongs where we need forgiveness. With regard to the calls to action, our role is to educate ourselves about the issues and concerns raised and support the changes needed as best we can. What do you know about the [Doctrine of Discovery](https://www.united-church.ca/social-action/justice-initiatives/doctrine-discovery) which is named in today’s call to action? The Doctrine of Discovery is a legal framework that justified the European colonization around the world and included a declaration that any lands belonged to the Christian powers that discovered them. I encourage you to do some reading and research about this doctrine this week.

Another act of reconciliation in the calls to action is to adopt the [United Nations Declaration of Rights for Indigenous Peoples](https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf) (UNDRIP). This is timely during the Lenten season as well because there is presently a campaign among ecumenical churches and other organizations supporting UNDRIP, to fast for its passage called [Let’s Walk the Talk for Reconciliation](http://pfir.ca/) with Bill C262. This private members bill will bring Canadian legislation in line with the Declaration and it presently needs to get to the Standing Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples soon or there will not be enough time for it to achieve royal assent. We can support it in a variety of ways including contacting our local MP. Reconciliation and forgiveness are intertwined and require action.

Jesus knew that we need to talk to one another to resolve conflicts. That is why he laid out a process to speak directly to the person you have a difference with. If that doesn’t work, he says to speak with them along with two others. If that doesn’t resolve the conflict then bring it before the community. The definition that the United Church conflict resolution facilitators use, states: conflict arises whenever there are two ideas in the same room. Note that this definition does not indicate two people. We can have internal conflicts when we have two different ideas about anything. When two or more ideas are shared, it creates change. So if we want healthy change we need invite and engage in healthy conflict. What is important when there are different ideas among people, is that we listen to one another, with an openness to hear what the issues and concerns are. It is an opportunity to hear all the possibilities of all sides. It can lead to new insights and understandings, which can enable movement forward together, maybe even in a completely different direction.

As I have learned more about my personality, one of the things I have come to be aware of, is that when I am stressed, I start worrying about all the possibilities. I start having conversations in my head with those who are annoying me or who I may be frustrated with. I have learned to be aware of this and work to catch myself when hear these conversations in my head and work to have that conversation for real, face to face. It is not always easy and I am not always successful at taking that step, but when I do, it has been very beneficial and moves the relationship forward. They are important steps toward reconciliation and conflict resolution. We are all works in progress.

As we move through times of conflict and challenge in our lives, our work, our personal relationships and in the church, may we remember the importance of talking to one another and not keeping our feelings to ourselves. Jesus calls us to loving forgiveness over and over again. His seventy times seven response is an expression of his time, meaning an unlimited amount. God’s grace is sufficient and unbounded. May we draw on that grace and love as we enter into and move through the conflict that occurs in our lives and communities.