

Sermon P133 for February 12, 2017

I was one of the leaders at a retreat for the ministry personnel of Bruce Presbytery. And so was Fred Monteith. The theme of the retreat was “Leadership in Changing Times.” Fred was helping the participants gain some clarity about their leadership style so that they could know what about themselves they could count on, and what about themselves they needed to change.

One of the exercises that Fred had us do was focused on our priorities. The first thing he asked of us was that we gather in the centre of the room. All we had to do was stand there. So far, things were not too tricky. Then he asked us to move to one side of the space if our priority were to do the right thing. We were to move to the other side if our priority were to do the thing right.

Do the right thing, or do the thing right? Do I focus on discerning what the right, best, most inclusive path is? Or do I focus on being as compassionate and just as I can be, no matter what the decision of the congregation? Do the right thing? Or do the thing right?

I made a snap decision and headed for the “do the right thing” side of the room. On my way there, I paused. Of course I want to do the right thing. Who wouldn't? But then I thought of all the times in my ministry when my congregations chose a plan or direction or a priority that was not my first choice. Church, for the most part, is a democracy and ministers, for the most part, are not dictators. I have dozens of memories of moving in a direction that was not

my priority and, not being able to do what I thought was the right thing, I had the task of doing the chosen thing right.

Having stopped and thought this through, I started to head away from “do the right thing” side to the “do the thing right” side of the room. But part way over, I stopped again. I just could not say about myself that I was a minister for whom doing the right thing was not a priority.

Fred called time on the decision making phase of things, and I found myself stuck in the middle. In my life, I am not often there, halfway between “yes” and “no,” halfway between “end” and “means to an end,” halfway between a clear direction and the messiness of process. Unable to choose a priority in a priority-setting exercise. Hmm. I have done a lot of thinking about this ever since.

All of that thinking came home to roost as I struggled with today’s scripture. When I found myself as confused on Wednesday as I was on Sunday when I read the lection for today, I asked myself why. Why am I struggling to find a way forward? Why do these few verses of the Sermon on the Mount seem so opaque, so impenetrable, so difficult to crack open?

That’s when I remembered myself stuck between doing the right thing, and doing the thing right.

Jesus understood the tension between these two priorities. He grew up with the Law of Moses, which was about doing the right thing. Doing the right

thing was his starting place. And as he lived into his ministry, he understood that doing the thing right was even more important.

Take the portion of his teaching that we read today. The law is clear-as clear then as it is now. The right thing is not to take the life of another person. We all have heard the Ten Commandments and one of them is “thou shall not kill.” It is not that Jesus refuses to uphold this law. It makes sense. It makes safety. It protects the vulnerable. It is the right thing.

But it is not the only thing. Jesus sees more than the rules. He sees behind the rules to intention, to the heart, and teaches that along with this “right” thing of valuing another’s life, there is more. The “more” is the intention behind the action. A person can choose not to take another’s life and remain angry and hostile and antagonistic with family or friends, co-workers, neighbours, strangers, the marginalized, the different, and even the most astoundingly reactive American presidents.

Holding on to hostile anger and hatred of the other still leaves the world angry, hostile, dangerous place. Choosing not to kill is good. Everyone gets that. But holding others in contempt does nothing to make the world a better place. So, Jesus teaches that it is not good enough not to kill. We need to mend fences with one another. We need to talk through our conflicting ideas and plans. We need to risk conversation with one another to see if differences can be respected and relationship restored. He invites us to dare the face to face conversation and see if we can identify common ground. This search for

commonality is what defuses anger. The option to speak face to face can create dignity and safety.

Simply put, unchecked anger is a weapon and it is lethal. It kills spirit and community. It leaves all of us alone, with self-defense as our number one priority. In Jesus' wisdom, it is not enough to do the right thing and obey the "do not kill" commandment. In Jesus' wisdom, it is important to solve conflict right, on a level playing field, with compassion as the driver, not anger.

Think of where anger takes us: into broken family, into lost friendship, into antagonistic community, into toxic churches, into icy silence, into broken hearts and broken covenants. No one has to lose a life for the cost of anger to soar. Do the thing right, says Jesus. "Don't kill spirit and connection with anger. Do the right thing and restore relationship." It will change the world.

Now, Parkminster has lived through a time of angry difference. It is not secret that the conflict was costly. Some people left in fear. Some left in disappointment. Some stayed and stayed angry and afraid. Many stayed and let loving spirit heal and renew the life of this most gifted and generous and bold congregation. The healing is God, and if we remember how upset we were two years ago and how safe we feel now, then believing in transforming holy love should be a cake walk. Back then, the differences in people's perceptions and experience were real differences. Different people saw things differently. And because Parkminster matters deeply to most of us, there was a lot at stake.

As I shared life with you over the past years, I saw that we needed a better way to deal with anger, to meet one another face to face and a better way to heal the brokenness that difference can cause. This work is primarily about giving spirit the room to work, to transform and to renew. That's why my last big piece of work is our conflict resolution strategy that the Transition Team has been shaping. You can begin to share in it by joining one of the February workshops, by learning about conflict resolution styles, and by committing to healing anger with dialogue as a better way, a healthier way, a holier way.

I am inviting you to do the thing right and to create safe space here. I am inviting you to live gospel and not just the letter of the law. I am inviting you not only to find a better way, but to be the better way. For those of you who are married or have life partners, your partnerships will be joyful and more satisfying. For those of you who are parents or grandparents or significant adults in the life of a child, you will love better and raise up peace-loving children. Workplaces will be creative and more productive. Neighbours will make safety for one another. Church will dare more and love more. And all of us will be people of compassion and heart, justice and shalom.