

Sunday January 15, 2017

Luke 4: 14-30

When my older son was about 10 and playing in the school ground during recess one wintery day, he slipped and cut his knee on a sharp bit of ice. It was deep enough to need stitches, and my spouse took him to the doctor. Before the doctor gave him the needle to freeze the area, my son said, "can you wait a minute?" He then pulled his winter hat out of his coat pocket, put it on his head and pulled it down over his eyes. The doctor laughed and remarked that it was the most unique way to deal with fear of needles that she had seen. If I can't see it, it's not there.

Some of you will know that the last piece of work I had to do to complete my Interim Ministry Training, which feels like it has gone forever because I wasn't able to complete it last year, was a Field Project. This project was to be planned and implemented over a period of several months this past fall, developed in consultation with the Transition Team, and it also involved a number of conference calls with a facilitator and a small peer group that I studied with in Chicago last August.

I chose to do my project on Conflict styles, or how we respond to conflict. Specifically, I wanted to use tools from our training event to explore alternate understandings of conflict, and then have folks apply the learnings both personally, and as a group, in the context of this community. Rather than seeing conflict as a problem to solve, or as a situation with only two responses – fight, or flight – I hoped that the tools might help us explore our own response to conflict, overcome the fear and avoidance of conflict, and perhaps even build strategies for future situations when conflict arises.

I invited those in leadership positions - members of Session, the Official Board, the Transition Team, and Chairs of Committees, to take on yet another piece of work in their already busy lives. I was extremely grateful that 24 folks agreed to take part in the project.

It's not that I thought St. John's was any different than any other congregation, because I don't know of a faith community that doesn't have unresolved conflicts in its history, or at the very least, differences of opinion about anything from worship and liturgy, to money, to who puts the garbage out. In our gathering in Chicago

we heard many stories, both case studies, and personal accounts, about church conflict.

But I had a sense that finding a way to think about conflict in a different way - perhaps even to see conflict as an opportunity for conversation - might be a great gift as we begin to make some hard decisions about our future.

I can feel your blood pressure rising from here ... right?

There's a common, unspoken assumption that Christians shouldn't fight. Or at least, we shouldn't be seen to be fighting. So, much of it goes underground, or outside of the walls of Sunday morning, and manifests itself in conversations and alliances around the edges.

And I've certainly heard often that folks don't come to church for one hour out of the crazy and conflict-ridden rest of their lives to deal with conflict in church.

But really, is that reasonable? Does anyone know any group that doesn't have a diversity of opinion and the possibility of conflict within its membership?

Before we began the study, I circulated an article to the participants written by church consultant David Brubaker.¹ In it he made several rather provocative and eye catching statements:

The first one is kind of an obvious one, although is probably often overlooked in the midst of conflict. People don't fight over things they don't care about. Brubaker says that when we listen long enough, and ask the right questions, we will usually uncover the deeper values and beliefs of those invested in the conflict. And it's then that we begin to understand and have empathy for another's opinion. I think that's an important piece to remember.

Another point he made, which I know was somewhat controversial when we first began the project, is that effective leaders move towards conflict, not away from it. Wait. What was that? Yes, you heard right. Effective leaders move towards conflict, not away from it.

Well that certainly generated some discussion. But what he meant, and what we discovered over 3 sessions, is that at the heart of conflict is diversity –

¹ <http://www.congregationalconsulting.org/changing-the-ending-of-our-conflict-stories/>

and difference of opinion. We love our diversity! Don't we celebrate it in this community? But when it gets to decision making, sometimes it feels like we don't want to hear someone whose opinion is different from ours.

Decision making gets messy when people have differences of opinion. It takes longer. It feels harder to work through it. And, as we learned when we filled out the Conflict Styles Inventory, we each have a different way of responding to conflict initially. And that's based on many things - on our personalities, on our families of origin, on past experiences. The questionnaire helped us identify those first responses, helped us understand the gifts of that response, and also when that response might present a challenge in a conflict situation.

Well that's a long introduction to our scripture passage today. A passage that illustrates how not to act in conflict.

Even though this is the third Sunday in January, it's our first sermon of the new year. The first Sunday was New Year's Day. That was our lessons and carols service. And last Sunday was cancelled because of the snowstorm. I would have introduced the Gospel of Luke, which is where our readings will come from this

year until Easter, and we would have heard Luke's account of John the Baptist, and Jesus's baptism.

Today's story, from chapter 4, is right after the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Today's story recounts the first public act of Jesus' ministry.

At first, things are going well. Jesus is reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. The earlier stories in Luke tell us how Jesus' parents, Mary and Joseph, observed Jewish customs, and this story begins by showing how Jesus honours those customs, and knows his tradition well. He goes to the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth, and reads from the scrolls which contain the holy scriptures.

The "year of God's favour" at the end of the words from Isaiah refers to Israel's tradition of Jubilee, which was to be observed every 50 years. Jubilee called for the return of all lands to their original owners. It provided for the freedom of indentured servants. There is no evidence that Israel every fully kept a year of Jubilee, yet it remained a promise and a hope. And in Luke's account, Jesus begins his public ministry by

announcing after the reading that “today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”²

Some suggest that Luke is laying out a “manifesto” ... this is what Jesus plans to do in his ministry ... “to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release for the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

And the people respond positively. The good news is here! Today! And of course, there’s a bit of pride involved. “Isn’t that Joseph’s boy?” He’s one of us! Perhaps they even thought there might be some special perks for their town because he was the hometown boy.

But then Jesus, as he so often did, flips things around. “Oh, and by the way ... that good news? It’s not for you. It’s for those out there ... the widows and orphans. The ones you don’t think belong in the kingdom of God.” And just to make the point, he recalls two stories from his tradition, stories of the prophets Elisha and Elijah, who were sent by God to save people who were outsiders - a gentile widow, and a foreign leper.

Well that was a short honeymoon. They turned on him. They were incensed, and chased him out of town. Tried to run him off a cliff. But somehow, Luke says Jesus “passed through the midst of them and went on his way.”

We are going to see this over and over again as we hear the stories of Jesus’ ministry this season. Jesus knew how to stir things up. He spoke in a way that not only fully engaged people, but challenged their thinking and fired their imaginations. Often people didn’t like, or even fully understand what he said, but they couldn’t ignore his words. And they couldn’t go back to the status quo after hearing him speak. He made you think, and it was uncomfortable.

A couple of years ago when I was a Chaplain at Dalhousie, I was co-leading a workshop with a couple of students about how to address bystander behavior. Using a video resource from Northern Ireland called “Upstanding”, we looked at stories of ordinary people who had stood up, and done the right thing during the time that is known as The Troubles. It is a resource that is used in every public school in Northern Ireland, and it

² Seasons of the Spirit, ACE, 2010, Congregational Life, p.96

helps generate conversation about how to cultivate upstander behavior – not just in Northern Ireland, but wherever you are. The students who traveled to Northern Ireland with me have used the resource in several high schools here in HRM, and at Dalhousie.

At this day long workshop, at one point early in the afternoon I made a remark about the perception that Canadians were typically nice. That’s when one participant, an African Canadian woman from Southern Ontario, challenged me. “Actually, that’s not been my experience,” she said, “I don’t think Canadians are very nice.” And I was silent for a minute, and then felt kind of ashamed, and then fought back a feeling of anger and a knee jerk defensive remark, and the urge to run her off a cliff ... and then I managed to say “I’m sorry. Can you tell me more about your experience?” And she did. And it was very hard to hear, because her experience growing up in Canada as a black woman was very different than mine. And she hadn’t experienced Canadians as being stereotypically nice. And I thanked her for her honesty and courage in telling her story. And I continue to learn from that very humbling and extremely uncomfortable moment.

Sometimes, we have to speak the truth to power. And sometimes, we are the power that needs to hear the truth. I would recommend highly the new movie Hidden Figures, the true story of how three remarkable African American women changed the course of history over 50 years ago while working at NASA. Not only was each of them a brilliant mathematician in their own right, but they had to daily challenge the racist and misogynist stereotypes of the day. They said things that their colleagues did not want to hear.

Many of the folks who did the conflict study with me remembered many years ago when we were still at the old church, when about 80 people took part in a survey called “Theological Worlds.” It was an incredibly complex survey, which folks diligently worked through, and then we had a workshop after church to learn which “theological world” was our individual preference. There are 5 theological worlds, all very different, all having distinct needs and preferences about worship and how we gather, the songs we sing, our rituals and prayers. And we found out that there are folks in our midst from all 5 theological worlds. Some people hate breaking into groups to have a conversation. Some people love it. Some people love the old hymns. Others can’t stand

them. Some love a bit of silence in the service, while others just about go out of their minds during even a minute of silence. Do you see the challenge for worship committees and worship leaders?

Go figure. We all have different preferences when it comes to worship. But that exercise helped us accept our differences. It helped us as we created a new worship space here at the Conservatory. It helped us understand each other.

I tell this story often, so forgive me if you have heard it before. I heard the wonderful theologian and hymn writer Miriam Therese Winter say once: "A true community is one where this week, I will stand and sing Faith of our Fathers, because I know it's your favourite hymn, and it holds great meaning for you. But next week, we will sing Mothering God, and you will stand and sing that because you know it's my favourite hymn."

We have a lot of work to do in the next few months as we begin to narrow down our options and choices about many things as we move into the future - space, governance, resources. And we are not going to agree on everything.

How will we create a safe community, where all voices can be heard, where there is a place for all, even those with whom we disagree? Sometimes it's hard to find a model of respectful behavior out in the world these days, a world where folks seem to be increasingly polarized and acrimonious. We have a chance to model something different. It will take commitment, time and faith to deeply listen and hear each other across differences. It will take resisting the urge to pull the hat down over our heads so we can't see and hear things that make us uncomfortable. Are we up to the challenge? I believe that we are. I pray that we are.

But we are not alone. Thanks be to God.