

Love Anyway

One of my jobs as your Interim Rector is to foster a healthy church environment so that members can listen, learn and love one another as followers of Jesus. In that regard, I can't think of a more appropriate gospel than today's text.

Jesus tells us what should happen in the church when relationships are put in tension. He knew that wherever you have two or more people together in community, there are bound to be disagreements and even conflict.

Years ago, Rabbi Ed Friedman wrote a landmark book titled *Generation to Generation*, which made the case that family systems and church and synagogue dynamics are similar. Families and churches have a lot in common.

I once saw an anniversary card for couples that have been married more than 20 years. It described the four stages of marriage: the honeymoon, the shock of reality, the adjustment, and finally, the stage of quiet contentment. Inside the card read, "If you two don't hurry, you'll never get past the honeymoon stage!"

The fact is, sooner or later, as Rabbi Friedman wrote, everyone gets past the honeymoon stage. But if you work at

your marriage, and if there's communication, compatibility, and respect, there's no reason why the relationship can't grow in intimacy and satisfaction.

Just as in marriage, so in the church there are bound to be disagreements and quarrels, and perhaps even conflicts over a wide variety of issues. People have their opinions – and that's a good thing because every voice in the church needs to be heard and taken seriously.

Jesus was astute enough to anticipate that even the best Christians wouldn't always agree on every matter, so he gives us a way of mending broken relationships within the church family.

Jesus first recommends straight talk. You've got a problem with a member of the church. Deal with that person directly – one-on-one if you can. Don't do it in public, because you never want to embarrass a person. Do it in private; and don't beat around the bush or sugarcoat it. Get right to it.

And, I might add, don't do it by e-mail. If Jesus was living in the 21st century, he would add a new line to the Lord's Prayer. It would go like this: "Forgive us our e-mails as we forgive those who send us e-mails."

Communication is more than saying whatever comes to your mind in the middle of the night without pondering the implications of what you are saying. Remember the delete key on your computer is there for a reason. Use it every chance you can.

When you have a concern about another person, share it in face-to-face conversation. If someone is doing something you think is hurtful, destructive or just plain wrong, speak to that person for heaven's sake. Don't stay silent. Take initiative. Say something – but say it directly to the person who offends you and not to a third party, because then you are engaging in gossip.

Someone once compared gossip to gasoline being poured on a fire – it can turn a small camp fire into a large forest fire.

Now for some people, directly confronting another person is never a problem. They rather enjoy saying things that take someone down a notch or two.

George Bernard Shaw, for example, was famous for his caustic comments, but he met his match with Winston Churchill. Shaw sent Churchill two tickets to the opening night of his play Saint Joan with this note: "One for yourself and one for a friend – if you have one." Churchill replied

expressing regret at being unable to attend, but asking for tickets for the second night, “that is, if there is one.”

And then, of course, there is the famous rivalry between Lady Astor and Churchill where with some exasperation she said, “Winston, if I were married to you, I’d put poison in your coffee.” To which Churchill replied, “And, if you were my wife, I’d drink it!”

As I say, some people seem not to have any trouble with straight-talk, but I don’t think this is what Jesus had in mind. St. Paul tells us that we should speak the truth in love. You can’t have a meaningful conversation if all you do is berate the other person. You can’t communicate if all you do is accuse. Truth always needs to be communicated in love or you risk a rupture in the relationship.

So, the first question to consider when speaking to another person is this: Am I speaking the truth in love? If you’re not, then you’re not speaking the truth.

Jesus goes on to say that if straight talk doesn’t work in solving the problem, get others involved. Take it to the church. Get help from the clergy or teachers or medical professionals. Go for counseling or try mediation. Bring in people who are competent and compassionate. A few wise

and loving friends may be just the thing you need. But don't keep the problem to yourself. Don't isolate yourself or refuse help. Rely on the support of others to help carry your burdens.

Some of us may remember Charles Colson. He was President Richard Nixon's hatchet man in the days during Watergate. On the evening he pleaded guilty to charges of obstructing justice, three members of Congress from both political parties met with him at his home well into the night. They were not there to offer him any political or legal advice. They were there to pray with him and give him the moral and spiritual strength to do what he knew was right.

Their prayers did not prevent Charles Colson from going to prison or being disbarred as a lawyer, but those prayers did enable him to give his life to Christ, deal with the reality of going to prison, and become a wiser, better human being who would touch the lives of many along the way.

In the church, we are responsible for one another. Don't hold back your struggles and problems. Share them with the people you trust who will offer you the love and support to get through whatever burdens you are carrying alone.

Now let's say you confronted the other person, but to no

avail. You've gone to church, you've gotten counseling, you've shared with friends, and maybe even tried mediation – but the problem persists. The church member will not change his or her destructive behavior. What do you do next?

Our passage seems to suggest drastic action. End the relationship. Show them the door. Kick them out of the house. This is called excommunication which is still practiced by some churches to discipline members.

But... there's a problem here. The problem is that "three strikes and you're out" is against everything else Jesus teaches about forgiveness. In fact, "three strikes and you're out" refutes the passages that immediately precede and follow our reading.

In Matthew 18:10-14, Jesus tells his disciples the parable of the Lost Sheep, which ends with Jesus saying, "It is not the will of my Father... that any of these little ones should perish." In Matthew 18:21-22, Jesus says to Peter that he is to forgive a brother or sister who sins against him not seven times, but seventy-seven times. Now if Jesus says to forgive the ones who hurt us; that surely includes the members of our own church.

Of course, I am not saying – and Jesus does not say – that there aren't times when we should practice tough love – call people to accountability, have them take responsibility for their actions, and insist they stop their destructive behavior. But it's one thing to demand a person own up to his or her irresponsible behavior; it's another thing to disown the person entirely.

Admittedly, we are dealing with a delicate balance here. You don't want anyone to disrupt or sabotage a church but neither do you want to give up on anyone. Every person is of supreme value, a child of God, loved by God. Our great God doesn't give up on any of us; neither should we give up on one another.

This is the tough part about being a Christian. To love people who are lovely is easy. To love people who are not so lovely is hard.

Several years ago, when Professor Carlos De Aquino visited his mother in Miami, he met with a group of ladies, almost all of whom were refugees from Cuba. One of the ladies asked Carlos: "Is it possible for Fidel Castro to convert on his deathbed and end up in heaven?"

Carlos replied, "Well, of course it's possible. That's the

Christian faith – it's all grace. Any of us have a chance to make it into heaven."

The lady looked up at Carlos and said, "Then I'm not sure I want to go to heaven if Castro is there."

I feel that woman's struggle. As a priest I am sometimes asked, "Will I meet my loved ones in heaven?" Honestly, that's not a question that bothers me very much. The question that bothers me is, "Will I be ready to live for eternity with some of the people I have met on earth?" If I wind up sharing the same mansion with these people, will not that make a hell of a heaven? That's the question which bothers me.

So how do you deal with a church member with whom you have a problem? Talk straight first, speaking the truth in love. If that doesn't work, get others involved – get help from the clergy, go for counseling, try mediation, bring in trusted friends. When all that fails, go with the intention of Jesus' full gospel message and make room for God's love and mercy to seep through our lives.

Lastly, keep in mind that we are not accountable for the actions and attitudes of others. We can only be accountable for ourselves. As a wise priest once told me, it takes one

person to forgive. It takes two persons to reconcile.

When I was a young priest in upstate New York, a family left the church within a few months after my arrival. I never found out why – whether I was too conservative or too liberal or too much unlike the previous Rector. Being a young priest, I felt hurt, rejected.

Then one day, while reading the Daily Office, the Holy Spirit said to me, “Get over it. If everyone didn’t follow Jesus, why should you think everyone should follow you?”

So, I have learned over the years that not everyone is at the same place in life, and that the only way to avoid bitterness and rancor is to agree to disagree without holding a grudge.

A few years ago, I discovered this reflection which has been helpful in how I practice ministry, and I end by sharing it with you.

People are illogical, unreasonable and self-centered.
Love them anyway.

If you are good, people will accuse you of ulterior motives.
Do good anyway.

Honesty and frankness will make you vulnerable.
Be honest and frank anyway.

People really need help,
but may attack you if you help them.
Help them anyway.

In the final analysis, it's between you and God.
It was never between you and them anyway.

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