

COMING TO LIFE

This past week, most of each day, for me, was filled with overseeing and attending the MC Sask. education event. The seminar was about conflict resolution and mediation. In addition, we hosted the trainer, too. So, the conversations and the learning continued the rest of each day.

So, as you can imagine, my thoughts were saturated with ideas and concepts embedded by the formal training and casual discussions. Needless to say, my scripture study and sermon preparation, was influenced by all this, too. Aware of that tilt, I did petition feedback on today's passages from a few people in the church, in order to get a more balanced perspective.

Still, I couldn't help but see parallels in the four passages to topics and issues from the seminar. The passages seemed related.

Which, could be a fortunate blessing.....orforcing the message into the texts.

I'll go with the former. :)

Therefore, I want to share a few highlights from the seminar with you, this morning, that I think connect to the passages.

And, I will add, that all who attended, including myself, thought the material and the experience were excellent.

Most of the time was focussed on conflict resolution, which makes sense, because successful mediation requires understanding conflict and how to resolve it.

I realize that most of you have never experienced a conflict with anyone, but just in case you do someday, you may find this overview helpful.

To begin with, there are two aspects in a conflict: the issue or agenda and the relationship.

The tendency is to think the problem revolves around the agenda, and fixing that will solve the conflict.

People will go to a mediator in the hopes that he/she will solve the dispute over the issue / agenda.

But, it's not so simple, ...because the relationship is effected and part of the conflict, too.

Successful mediation could mean that both parties simply learned how to communicate and understand each other, with the agenda/issue dispute still in place.

The agenda and the relationship are both part of the conflict.

People react differently when a conflict arises.

Some will immediately bounce on the agenda--aggressively defending their own position and devaluing the other's. The relationship is not as important to them.

Some value both, and want only a win/win resolution, and that is called cooperating. However, this approach takes the most work.

Some people are compromisers. They will sacrifice some of the agenda and the relationship in order to relieve the stress of the conflict. In other words, you and I win some and we lose some, too--nobody is thrilled, but at least the conflict is over.

Church people tend to value compromise. I suppose because sacrifice is part of our training. Yet, compromise is a good approach in only some situations, and I'll give an example of that in a moment.

Another response to conflict is harmonizing--letting go of one's position in order to preserve the relationship, which is valued most.

And, the fifth reaction to conflict is avoidance. Avoiders can't stand the stress of the conflict and so hide or refuse to engage it, thus the conflict goes on, yet ignored.

There are situations when anyone of the five reactions could be the best approach. However, cooperation is the only one that seeks to heal both the issue and the relationship,..... but that hard work, with lots of stress in the process..... and it may not always be possible.

An example when compromise is not the best way:

Two sisters were fighting over the one last orange, and their arguing was getting ugly. So, their mother stepped in. She grabbed the orange, took a knife and cut it in two and gave each a half.

She thought she solved the conflict, believing they each got a little of what they wanted, and believing that both should learn to settle with less.

Yet, each sister stomped away in disgust, leaving the halves behind.

The mother called them back, and asked, "What's the problem?"

The one sister said, "I needed all the orange peel for a recipe.

The other declared, "I simply wanted the juice for a drink."

If questions had been asked,....the heart of the conflict--the needs could have been discovered.

Needs are the core of every conflict, be it empathy, appreciation, food, shelter, or even freedom.

Needs connected to the issue/agenda and needs in the relationship are at the heart of every conflict.

Therefore, the needs must be discovered and addressed, and sometimes, we must search to discover our own needs in a conflict.

We may not really know or have identified them. We may not know why we are getting so upset.

Subsequently, searching and learning needs is an absolute requirement in trying to resolve a conflict,..... and that process includes introspection and listening. It is dangerous to "assume." Listening is essential.

So,..... when there is a conflict and things are stressful, it is not easy to start the search / the questioning and learning process.

And, if the conflict is too intense, then a mediator will likely be needed. Also, the discipline of respect is required, and equality of power is necessary for negotiating. Again, a mediator will be needed if those elements are not in place.

Once there is respect and equality: it is important to address a conflict gently, so as to not inflame emotions by putting the other on the defensive.

Start by sharing your own observations of behavior, avoiding assumptions and conclusions. Such as, "I saw or heard the following..."

Next offer your feelings and interpretations of the behavior: "I felt.... because.... I thought it might mean,..... such and such."

Then, demonstrate authentic openness to the other's experience. For example, "Is this how you see it?".... or ... "How is it for you?"

And,..... listen..... listen..... listen.

Listening is more an act of will than a skill,.....AND... .. the other person will listen better.....AFTER she/he feels that he/she was heard and understood.

Then the "needs" can be explored, discovered and shared,.... and the journey to healing.....can begin. Resolving conflict is not easy; it is a process / a journey.

So,..... I've shared a few highlights from the seminar, and.... I think they relate to today's passages, too.

Looking at the Romans text, it is helpful to remember the context of Paul's letter.

As my esteemed colleague, Jake Buhler noted, " He was writing to Romans who were very logical. Romans thrived on logic."

Paul was trying to connect with them. In addition, the Christians in Rome were being persecuted. They Needed hope. That was a base need of theirs.

However, before Paul addresses that, he points out that we have a just relationship with God. We are treated with respect by God, as if we were equals.

By God's grace, our relationship with God is not conflicted with fear and paranoia.

Paul proceeds, and some of the feedback I received included some discomfort with "boasting" and the over simplified, sterile logic regarding suffering and hope.

I don't think Paul was "bragging" or suggesting, "Hey, you want hope, then toughen up, by persevering through suffering."

I think his "boasting" was focussed on the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit. In essence saying, "It really does work. I'm testifying to you. Investing in God and trusting in the Holy Spirit is worth the risk. It really does work. There is hope for you who are in the midst of struggling."

There is hope..... and you can trust God,..... is what the Romans needed to hear in the midst of the conflicts they were dealing with.

The understanding of peace with God really impressed me.

That sort of relationship doesn't exist with a cruel, judgmental ruler or authority. It's fascinating that God desires to lift us up / to empower us.

The Psalmist in verse 4 of Psalm 8 expressed surprise in this to, and the passage goes on to state that God has empowered us to be just a "little lower than God",.....in regards to how we relate to God and creation.

And, in practice,.... God does allow us to live and connect as equals, so that we can be in a peaceful and loving relationship with God.

This surprising arrangement is a risk for both God and us.....because trust and love is involved.... both ways.

I included the John 16 reading because of verse 12, which is:

"I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now."

There is more to learn, we are in process / we are not finished,... and thus we must keep seeking and listening.

And,..... the awareness that we may not be ready for some details or insights reveals a compassionate Lord,..... who knows us / knows OUR needs.

And,..... that is most impressive.

God is tuned into us. God listens to us. God knows us. God is doing God's part, and that's half of a healthy, vibrant relationship.

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Finally, the forth passage of the lectionary lessons for today is from Proverbs 8. We didn't read that, so I state two key verses.

Verses 1 and 4: "Does not wisdom call, and does not understanding raise her voice?"

"To you, O People, I call and my cry is to all that live."

There is an inner calling to grow in wisdom, and above that yearning is the louder cry to acquire understanding.

The living / those alive sense that need to embrace wisdom / to be open to possibilities and surprise,..... and the living have a strong, undeniable desire to learn / to truly understand,..... and not just cling to the safety of old rules and assumptions.

The Living risk..... reaching out and growing, and that means wrestling with conflict and struggling to understand "needs."

Spring invites a plant to reach out with its leaves and roots in order to live / to flower and to bear fruit, and there are great risks in doing that. A hard frost could happen or another environmental hazard, yet... to remain dormant is the process of dying.

In love God risked connecting with us humans as an equal..... as another human--Jesus,..... and God continues to reach out to us through the Holy Spirit. God does not give up on us. God risks, even trusts us,.....and is willing to learn about each of us,.... in the hope that our relationship with God..... and with all things will be whole / full / vibrant..... and alive.

That's half the story. That is half of the process in healing a relationship and dealing with conflict.

The other half,..... is each of us doing our part,..... and that may begin with earnestly listening and learning.

We are drawn to life--to grow and be in peace.
Perhaps we will respond to that calling?