

What do you do with conflict?

In anthropology or psychology, we might be told that should there be tension between two people or groups of people, that the fight, flight or freeze reactions might manifest from our primitive brains. Certainly we have seen this in these recent weeks.

Conflict in confrontation are not new. This is why Jesus prepares his disciples for confrontation with people ... but confrontation with people who are NOT different in language, or skin colour, or religion, or history. Jesus is sending the disciples out into potential conflict with their own people, their own group.

Forbidding them to go to anyone else, he says:

“Do not go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. As you go, proclaim this message: ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’

It would have been timely if this were a passage where Jesus deals graciously, as he most often did, with a social, political or religious adversary, maybe a Roman, a Greek or even a Samaritan.

Yet maybe there will be some insights for current events for we who are presbyterians.

I think the first thing we need to do is disarm the text. I think it is possible to read this story with discomfort, thinking that Jesus is being antagonistic toward his own people, but to set us at ease it is best to remember that the impetus for sending the disciples was Jesus' *compassion* for the crowds. He sees them as *harassed* and *helpless*. For Jesus, evangelism has the very same source as does justice, his heart for reconciliation. Reconciliation to me means disarming differences and coming together in peace. As we will see, peace is important in the understanding of this text.

There is a sense that within the call to evangelism there is a sense of seeing the full person. For Jesus, evangelism isn't about church attendance or status. For Jesus, evangelism is a harvest. In agriculture, harvest is the *moment (chairo)* for gathering of mature crops. This means Jesus is looking for people who have blossomed and are ready to seek what is next. There is also the very clear directive from Jesus to his disciples, that they are to go out as healers and to drive away evil.

Again, for Jesus evangelism is about the whole person, body, mind and soul and is done with a sense of setting free from evil and disease.

I love how the disciples are all named here. Even the traitor, Judas Iscariot. If we take our time and think about the stories we know of them, we remember that they are not perfect; we remember that they were not fully trained; we remember that a moment ago, they were only fishermen and accountants, zealots and doubters. But they were called and they did follow.

After the disciples are named, Jesus sends them to *the lost sheep of Israel*. I think he is sending them to his own people for a couple of reasons. **One**, this is people for whom Jesus is feeling compassion and **two**, this may be a source of early success for them. He is sending out the disciples to a people who are already hoping for the Messiah, who already know the stories, who have already celebrated the feasts and observed all the Laws and know the prophets.

If the disciples are to have success in evangelism, this may be the best people to go to first. People who have already been insiders of the faith. I think during Covid, when everything church is online, that this is a perfect time to send links to any of our own *lost sheep* as it were. For many there is not an awful lot to anyway, and an online service might be of interest. They don't have to show up for the awkward surprised looks.

Yeah, now is a perfect *moment* to send out a link and try to connect with that person for whom your own compassion will not let go. It could be a very healing gift, with very little cost.

There is a beautiful line, from a beautiful hymn that we sometimes sing in which there is both a friendly reminder and a friendly command for us to share whatever it is we have received from God: love, grace, forgiveness, instruction, encouragement, compassion ... whatever good gifts we have received, let us share.

Freely you have received, freely give.

The word *freely* spills into the next section of the text as well.

“Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belts— no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff, for the worker is worth his keep.

Jesus is instructing his disciples to be at the mercy, grace and hospitality of those whom they meet. They are not to show up with their own means but be completely dependant on those who receive them. Don't bring anything, says Jesus, not even a hostess gift.

From our perspective, the human organization that is Christianity, is a big entity and like many big human entities it carries a lot of mistrust. We have to undo that perspective to get at the humility of this text. Jesus' disciples are not part of some huge human organization. They are 12 misfit followers. They don't carry any weight of influence or power. In fact it is just the opposite: The only thing they carry to the houses they enter is the dust on their feet.

Yes, if rejected, Jesus instructs them to shake off the dust of their feet and clothing, from that house, as a sign of separation from those who had rejected the message of Jesus. This was a Jewish custom of the time that was used as a visual gesture to demonstrate disappointment in the rejection of the message offered.

In the commentaries there is also a link here to Isaiah 52 which is a song of return from exile.

Isaiah 52 includes themes of liberation, rejoicing and good news carried by messengers *on foot*. It says in liberation to shake off the 'dust' of the previous enslavement and to sit enthroned in found freedom.

Yet in confrontation there is always a risk of rejection of the message.

Jesus says those who will not make peace with God risk severe judgement, but Jesus is clear that we are to leave severe judgement up to God. Sodom and Gomorrah were judged by God and not Abraham. We are to ambassadors of peace, not judgement.

As Isaiah 52 says:

How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation,
who say to Zion,
“Your God reigns!”

As disciples of Jesus, our feet carry, bear, proclaim, bring ... Good News, good tidings and proclaim peace ... and in Jesus' teaching there is a lovely call to peace, even in confrontation of rejection.

Jesus says:

If the home is deserving, let your peace rest on it; if it is not, let your peace return to you.

I believe this is a call to disciples to have enough peace for two ... enough peace for two people or peoples. What I mean is that when we offer our peace to someone, we would of course like to receive that person's peace in return. If we don't receive that person's peace in return and only receive anger or rejection, then our human response might be to respond with fight, flight or freeze. Let me also say that there is a moment for righteous anger in some confrontations where justice is at stake. We know all about that from the prophet Amos.

But when we are reaching out, when we are doing evangelism to the whole person, or any kind of good news sharing ... there is a call to let your own peace return to you. Jesus is saying let the peace you have offered to the other be enough for you as well. After all isn't peace without condition at best, just an armistice -or at worst self serving.

I was listening to an interview with Olympian Mark Tewksbury. It was an interview reflecting on the different kinds of prejudices that continue to exist in human relationships. He was talking about how difficult it was at first for his mom to accept that he was gay. He said he had to make space for her to be upset. She had not yet had the time to accept *what* he had already accepted about himself. In the interview he said one of her first responses to him included the words 'you people ...' referring to LGBTQ persons in general.

His response was: 'Mom, I am your people'. In a sense he was letting the peace he offered his mom return to him from her. His peace would be enough for two in the meantime.

There is a reason Jesus calls us to offer our peace for two before giving up and shaking off the dust. People aren't always *in the moment* -ready to hear Good News. We humans often want to go directly to the shaking off of the dust part, even as we fight, flee or freeze.

But offering peace enough for two, creates and maintains room for dialogue. It calms the primitive responses of fight, flight or freeze.

And isn't this ***simply*** gospel?

When we could not make peace with God, God offered us a surplus of peace through Christ, so that we could be forgiven in reconciliation? God's divine peace returns to the Trinity, through us or rather sometimes even despite us, creating space for us in the harvest of a reconciled people.

And isn't all true peace building ultimately offering enough peace to create a safe space for others to come into, a place of peace for two? Two people. Two peoples. Two religions. Two communities. Two genders. Two sexualities. Two sinners.

God has shown us the power of peace offered without condition.

And if we only ever offered peace on the condition that peace is expected in return, who would ever go first in the offering of peace?