

### Third way thinking: Solving difficult problems!

Text: “If there is a serious injury you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth... Exodus

“You have heard it said: eye for an eye tooth for a tooth, but I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the cheek turn the other also... Jesus

I want today to talk about one of the most difficult problems we face as a world and how to get beyond it. This problem is behind every crisis we face today. Its behind the conflict between Republican and democrat. Its behind the conflict between Russia and the Ukraine. It's behind the Palestinian Israeli conflict, behind terrorist groups such as ISIS and Al Qaeda.. It is the problem in our system of law courts. It is found in the church and in city councils and companies.

It is often behind the following list of problems:

- a conflict between a boss and workers
- a marriage with irreconcilable differences.
- a dispute with our child's school.
- a situation that puts us into financial trouble
- a critical decision that affects our job.
- an issue in the neighborhood or community
- family members who quarrel all the time and who now won't speak to one another at all.
- a job that doesn't satisfy
- a child who won't launch into the world
- a tough problem you need to solve for a customer
- an issue that might take you into court.

What is the problem behind the problem with these challenges?

It is polarized thinking.

Polarized thinking sees the world in either-ors/ my way vs. your way. Polarization suggests that there are only two ways to think. My way versus your way. We dig into our positions and fight one another either with words, lawsuits or bombs.

Stephen Covey has written a landmark book called: The Third Alternative: Solving Life's most Difficult problems.

When people are dug in on their side of an issue Covey suggests that both sides of an issue need to be challenged to ask one very important question:

**Are we willing to go for a solution that is better than any of us have come up with yet?**

**When both sides are prepared to ask this vital question; when they are really prepared to listen to each other with empathy and without trying to argue back, when both sides search for new possibilities, then both sides are in a position to create a third alternative which neither side has thought of before. When this happens excitement and creativity are unleashed and synergy is born.**

There is a joke told about a third alternative solution, concerning Hector McTavish, a Presbyterian living in Newfoundland.

Each Friday night after work, sun, snow or rain, Hector, being a Newfie, would fire up his outdoor grill and cook a moose steak.

But, all of Hector's neighbors were Catholics. And since it was now Lent, they were forbidden from eating meat on Fridays.

The delicious aroma from the grilled moose steaks was causing such a problem for the Catholic faithful that they finally talked to their priest. The priest came to visit Hector, and suggested that the only alternative between Presbyterian and Catholic was for Hector to become a Catholic. There was no third way.

So, after several classes and much study, Hector attended Mass, and as the priest sprinkled holy water over him, he said:

"You were born a Presbyterian and raised a Presbyterian, but now you is a Catholic."

At first Hector's neighbours were greatly relieved, that was until three weeks later on a Friday night, the wonderful aroma of grilled moose meat once again filled the neighborhood.

The priest was called immediately by the neighbours, and, as he rushed into Hector's yard, clutching a rosary and preparing to scold him, he stopped and watched in amazement.

There stood Hector, clutching a small bottle of holy water which he was carefully sprinkling over the grilling meat and chanting: "You wuz born a moose, you wuz raised a moose, but now you is a Codfish!"

If there was just one problem that we could solve on this planet in human relations, for me it would be this one: Polarized positions! "It's my way or the highway."

When Jesus encountered polarized thinking he always thought of a third way around the problem. The problem we face in the Middle East today is the same one he faced. An embedded a cycle of violence. It is the eye for an eye syndrome. You hit me I hit you back and it cycles endlessly.

Jesus was not happy with this Old Testament writing and so he overturned it and suggested a third way- "I say to you love your enemies do good to those who despitefully use you, Even so you will be children of your Father in heaven who brings his rain on the just and the unjust."

Do you remember what Jesus did when a woman caught in the act of adultery was brought before him for judgment? One position was that the woman must die. The other position was the woman's who wanted to live. What was Jesus to do? The law was clear- she should be stoned to death. So Jesus pauses and writes in the sand and when pressed by the multitude who are anxious to stone her, he suddenly says "Let the person

without sin cast the first stone!” And slowly the crowd melts away. The third alternative at work! No one is there who is worthy to condemn her so she must be set free- so says Jesus. How do you argue with that? They couldn't and walked away.

Remember the story of the Prodigal son? The prodigal leaves home, spends all of his father's money and is reduced to penury. For the elder brother this brother of his is a wastrel and not worthy of further consideration. It is black and white. As far as the elder brother is concerned it is his way and the younger brother can hit the highway.

The father in the story is a figure for God. The father uses the third way. He puts his ring of authority on the young wastrel's hand, he puts his best robe on the prodigal, he brings about a feast for his return, killing the calf that they had been fattening. **Instead of punishment the prodigal is celebrated for being alive. The father loves him back into the family.**

However the 2nd way thinker elder brother can't handle it and stays away from the party. And in doing so misses out on all the joy.

The elder brother is self righteous, based on his thinking. He has done everything right and his brother everything wrong so why should he go along with this third alternative?

So he is right, **and joyless...**

The father however is full of joy! He wants to party big time and he wants the elder brother to come in from the field where he has gone in disgust. The father is gracious and operates by grace, not merit; **and in that he is like God.** Jesus' point is the same: let the person without sin cast the first stone. Was the elder brother perfect and without sin? His anger shows that he has a long way to go. He is full of resentment and that is no virtue...

In South Africa, Bishop Tutu and Nelson Mandela set up a third way to avoid bloodshed. Instead of long trials and sentencing and putting people in prison Mandela and Tutu set up The Truth and Reconciliation Commission. If you were willing to confess everything you had done, then you could be forgiven by those you had wronged. This Third Way

approach saved South Africa from a bloodbath. There is no question of that.

In India, Gandhi chose a Third Way. Instead of fighting the British in armed combat or through terrorism, Gandhi advocated non violent protest- a third way and eventually he won India from the British through moral suasion.

Martin Luther King Jnr. did the same in America. Instead of advocating violence to get equality, he taught and modeled non violence and liberated the African Americans with that Third Way.

In the general Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, nearly every year, the question of Gay ordination rose again and again. But the General assembly found a Third way and now the GLTBQ community is accepted.

There is a fragment of church law that kept us together. It is a very small phrase “ No one is allowed to follow a divisive course.”

Let’s recognize it: either polarity was divisive. If we banned gay ordination that would be divisive. If we sustained it, that would be divisive. It was a catch 22. But we did follow: ***Neither side is to follow a divisive course.*** That opened up the possibility of a Third Way of thinking.

Here is what happened in 2021 The Presbyterian Church in Canada made changes to its theology and practice regarding marriage, permitting people to choose to define marriage either as a covenant relationship between a man and a woman or as a covenant relationship between two adult people. This decision provides Presbyterian ministers with liberty of conscience and the freedom to choose to officiate or not officiate at the marriages of same-sex couples. LGBTQ people (whether married or single) can be ordained and may serve as ministers and ruling elders in The Presbyterian Church in Canada.

The 2022 General Assembly adopted a [Confession to God and LGBTQ people](#), confessing the harm caused by homophobia, transphobia, heterosexism and hypocrisy in The Presbyterian Church

in Canada, and committing the church to a true change of heart and behaviour. The whole church is called to live out this confession as individuals and communities of faith so that harm does not continue.

This decision opened up the possibility of synergy – celebrating the many gifts of the gay community instead of excluding them. A third way is not compromise where there are winners and losers. It is a better way for all. Are we willing to think of a better way than we have thought of? That is the challenge!

Have you ever had a contractor work on your home and the work has gone bad? Here is a Third Way synergy story for you.

Stephen Covey had a friend who was finishing his dream home. It was a work of art with high ceilings and painstakingly carved wood moldings. Then the painter came to add the last touches. When the owner came home, he almost collapsed. The paint job was ruinous. In every room every molding was defaced with smeared uneven paint. There were smudges on doors and tiles. Paint dribbled down arched windows. It looked as if a child had been at work with a paintbrush or spray can.

Stephen's friend called the contractor who came over immediately. When he saw the work, his jaw fell open. And he immediately phoned the painter and asked him to come to the house.

Stephen's friend expected that the contractor would chew out the painter and fire him and demand his money back plus damages.

Instead, he met the painter at the door and shook hands with him.

The painter was a young man, barely out of his teens, who grinned and asked the contractor nervously how he liked his work? The contractor put his arm around him and walked him coolly through the house, pointing at this and that problem and then all three sat down to talk. The contractor asked a few questions and it became clear that the painter had

overstated his qualifications in order to get the job... in fact this was the first house he had ever painted!

The contractor continued to ask questions to the young man about his family, where he had gone to school, what his life had been like. Stephen's friend wondered why this had any relevance but he didn't interrupt. They soon learned that the boy had struggled in school and dropped out, gotten married very young and had a wife and baby to support. Obviously, he was trying to make a living the only way he could think of.

When they stood up the contractor apologized to Stephen's friend for not checking out the painter before hiring him. Then he asked the boy to bring into the house his painting equipment. Calmly he said to the boy "I'm going to teach you how to do this kind of job right."

Stephen's friend was doubtful of this strategy but went off to bed shrugging his shoulders...

Every day after that, the contractor and the painter worked together, laughing as they cleaned windows, scrubbed smudges away, sanded and repainted walls. At the end under the contractor's supervision the job was magnificent!

In the months that followed, the young man apprenticed to the contractor and became more and more capable until he could do the work exactly as the older man specified... He became the contractor's painter of choice and soon had more jobs than he could handle.

Covey says: "This small town contractor proved that synergy minded people are full of surprises. Instead of firing the painter in a huff or worse, ruining him with demands for damages- he chose to help the young man build a life and in the process become a valuable asset to his own business.

When Stephen's friend's lawyer showed up, she assured his friend that he had handled things well. There would be no lawsuit, no court fight, no demolition of a vulnerable young family. No 1st alternative wrestling the 2<sup>nd</sup> alternative. **No demands for fairness or justice or equity.**

After studying this for years, it is my own considered opinion that Jesus wants us all as Christians to become Third Way alternative thinkers at work, in our schools or businesses and in our church.

If the Session and congregation of Knox always approached all things with Third Way thinking, we could move beyond two alternative thinking into an exciting kind of synergy where Jesus lived and thought, where it becomes win / win.

I believe that this third way thinking could transform Knox, and if followed practically could help to assure its future here in Stratford. It would be so different to find a church home that sought continually for win/win.

“The Law of synergy or Win/Win says, ”Let’s not do it your way or my way; let’s do it the best way” .

Jimmy Carter says “Unless both sides win, no solution can be permanent.”

Becoming a Third way thinker releases creativity, excitement and a huge surprise :

**Joy!**

**Amen.**



