

**The Cross-Roads of Conflict**  
Reflection on Matthew 5:43-48  
Sunday March 13, 2011  
Trinity United, Ottawa  
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*Jesus said: 'Love your enemy.'*

Our Lenten learning journey this year explores the spiritual path of conflict and resolution, at any level from bickering or bullying to husband and wife fights to war and terrorism. Conflict often brings us to 'the cross' in our lives, but it can also reveal a spiritual cross-roads, where we are offered a choice about how to live onward.

Our Biblical departure point today lies at the very heart of Jesus' teachings - in the Sermon on the Mount - and at the heart of his Hebrew tradition in the Torah.

*Reading of Leviticus 19:17-19 and Matthew 5:43-48*

Do you hear Jesus referring to the ancient Hebrew Leviticus law 'love your neighbour'? And then, upping the ante for his Kingdom followers? He challenges them to do more than the Law requires. He calls us to transform ourselves and the world - by loving our enemies.

There is a short, searing scene in the movie 'Ghandi' that show us one man's challenge to love his enemy, because that is sometimes the only road out of painful conflict and into a place of healing peace. Perhaps you've seen it? Ghandi has committed himself to fasting, until violence between Hindus and Moslems ceases. He is weak with hunger, when a Hindu man who has participated in the violence and is in deep inner conflict, approaches Ghandi with a loaf of bread and a heart-wrenching confession. [Ghandi movie clip. Disc 1. Scene 27]

I don't remember if we see the outcome of this man's story, but we imagine it, don't we? This tortured man finds and adopts an enemy child, reluctantly coming to love

his new son, and through him, learning to respect the 'other' faith.

This man's original profound loss and anger, his judgment and enmity, will heal into personal peace through a new loving relationship. And perhaps he will even transcend his religious prejudice and become a bridge between Hindu and Moslem neighbours?

Have you ever experienced a conflict in your life, that turned into an opportunity to care and even love somebody you a first deeply disliked? These are not uncommon stories. A man who spoke at my dad's funeral told their story: He and my father had difficult dealings about several insurance cases, and one day he called my father to rail at him about his unreasonable decisions. After hearing out his angry tirade, my dad calmly suggested they meet for lunch. They ended up meeting for lunch for years. My father was a wonderful listener. This businessman, considerably younger, adopted my dad as a mentor. And clearly, by his tears at the funeral, came to love him. He and his wife still check in on my mom regularly.

Conflict is often a cross-roads that can lead to love and growth - if we choose. It seems that depending on the path we elect when an 'enemy' appears in our lives, we can descend into fear and fighting or ascend via the steep but sure spiritual path of reconciliation. That is the path that Jesus is calling us to, when he tells us we can 'be perfect, as our heavenly father is perfect.'

Perhaps reaching for 'perfection' and 'loving our enemy' sounds like so lofty an ideal that we are tempted give up before we start? But the true intention of this biblical wisdom is well within our human reach - with prayer and practise. But let's make our biblical directive even more do-able, by replacing our word 'love' with its more correct biblical translation from Jesus' Aramaic: compassion: the ability to feel with another's pain. Then let's define 'enemy' as any 'other' who we feel has caused us pain. Anybody who raises our anger, who we instinctively judge, hate, fear or blame. (Sometimes, the enemy is a voice inside our own head.)

As for being 'perfect' - here is another translation error that makes our Christian path

seem too steep to climb. That 'be perfect' is more accurately worded 'heal into wholeness, as God is whole and undivided.' Or 'be unstinting in your generosity, as the Great Householder of the Universe is generous.' Or 'be compassionate, in the way of the God of compassion.'

Compassion is the essential healing balm for all conflict situations. Compassion is the 'God energy' that knits all relationships together in Creation, and draws all that is broken by conflict, back together. God is unbounded love, generating enough compassion to heal the world. But we humans bury our loving compassion under defensive layers of anger and fear, covering our hurts. And we forget where love lies, deep in our hearts. Jesus challenges us to uncover God's precious caches of buried compassion - and apply it to all the conflicts born of the wounds in our families, workplaces, communities and world.

But how can you and I do this? We can't simply will ourselves to feel compassion - or to forgive. Healing relationships begins with our choice, but involves so much more than just a single choice to do the right thing. We need to be continuously strengthened by Spirit, self-awareness and plenty of intentional practise, to follow on Jesus' path.

Our Lenten journey to reconciliation and resurrection is thankfully long. We'll each take all the 'God time' that we need at our own cross-road of conflict. We can begin our trek to conflict resolution and personal transformation with baby steps, following in Jesus' footsteps. This path may take us into the hard terrain of anger, shame and blame, to the everyday crossroads where we choose either to escalate conflict, or consciously turn toward reconciliation. With that choice, we may explore the valley of self awareness of our feelings and needs, then emerge via the steppes of communicating needs and feelings. (That stretch is a two-way path, by the way - knowing our needs and feelings - and theirs.) All along the route, we can practise skills like empathic listening, healthy boundary setting and non-reactivity through meditation. Eventually, we will find our way into our surprisingly deep reservoir of compassion. Healing waters deep enough to bathe our self and our

neighbour - and eventually even that 'enemy' other. Ah! The freedom of forgiving! That is where we begin to revel in the release of our Resurrection energy!

Peace is what Jesus promises, if we follow his Way. But conflict is what we humans encounter on our way, challenging us to higher and higher levels of peace-making - even perfection. In the introduction of "The Crossroads of Conflict", Kenneth Cloke, a leading figure in the multi-disciplinary field of mediation and dispute resolution, writes about this spiritual path from conflict to transcendence:

"Every conflict we experience, no matter how trivial, points us towards a crossroads in our lives. One path leads us into anger, fear, confrontation and bitterness, and draws us into quarrels over the past...A second path leads us into empathy, acceptance, honesty and mutual respect, and draws us into negotiations over the future....a third path, branching off from the second, but largely hidden from view...leads us into increased self awareness, compassion, integrity and heartfelt communications. It wakes us up and nurtures our energy and spirit. This is the path of transformation and transcendence - now."

Tolstoy wrote about this bittersweet path of conflict to transcendence. We hear it, in this character's revelation: "He suddenly felt that the very thing that had once been the source of his suffering, had become the source of his spiritual joy, that what had seemed insoluble when he condemned, reproached and hated, became simple and clear when he forgave and loved."

May we all have our own revelations of God's love, on this Lenten journey from conflict to peace.