

Sage Responses to Group Conflict

Reflection on Exodus 1:1-22

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Trinity United Ottawa

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Our visit this morning with midwife Jan Teeven seems the occasion to get to know Shiphrah and Puah, two brave and clever Hebrew midwives, who are part of the back-story of Moses' birth in ancient Egypt.

Through the lens of this biblical story, we'll enter the dynamics of resolving group conflict, asking: what spiritual wisdom and skills can be called out of conflicted communities, to transcend their divisive experiences of oppressor and oppression?

Dramatized reading of Exodus 1:1-22

The two midwives are the heroes of the first Chapter of the Book of Exodus, because they managed to save the lives of Hebrew baby boys, risking their own lives by strategically defying Pharaoh. Their answer to his threatening accusation was a clever ruse that still makes women laugh. 'Hebrew women are different from Egyptian women. Our mothers give birth so fast! We always get there after the boys are born and already secreted away.'

Because the midwives revered God and would not take the life of newborn Hebrew males, they came up with this clever non-violent response to Pharaoh's genocidal order. And it worked - but only for a while. The root causes of the conflict were not shared and resolved between the two sides, so soon, Pharaoh escalated his call for violence.

This group conflict between Egyptians and Hebrews is not so distant from many conflicts today. There's a resource rich land - Egypt - and a migrant worker group who have become essential to the Egyptian economy. The Hebrew workers' place in their adoptive land has changed. Their population now outnumbers Egyptian

nationals. And there is a new Pharaoh, who is insecure imagining: 'Surely they will side with our enemies. They will cut us down in our beds.'

We easily imagine the fear of the Hebrews - slaves. But note here the fear of the Egyptian 'haves' - always uneasy in the presence of 'have nots.' Radical gaps between rich and poor are always de-stabilizing. Do a few contemporary situations come to mind? Maybe even some Canadian feelings and attitudes toward our immigrants, migrant workers, refugees and native communities?

How can we respond to situations where fear divides one group from another, creating a faultline of perceived difference within the oneness of all God's people? How can we resolve such conflicts - and get to forgiveness?

Those of us who are reading Desmond & Mpho Tutu's book, 'Made for Goodness' with our Monday Supper Group, will likely be thinking of the powerful examples of forgiveness we have all heard from Tutu's South Africa. Such forgiveness is often midwifed by their powerful 'ubuntu' Christian theology. Like the liberation theology of Latin America, ubuntu is a homegrown understanding of God's saving role - and ours- in a particular society rife with conflict.

Ubuntu thinking takes from scripture that all life needs and values community and thus 'my humanity is bound up with your humanity.'

Ubuntu seeks to see the gifts that suffering may yield to the wider community, if not to the individual in the moment. Our lives are not 'all about us.'

Ubuntu Christianity celebrates the message of the Creation story, hearing that we are all made for goodness, a truth that is testified to by our good feeling, when we do good. We experience joy when we 'tend and befriend' one another.

Ubuntu hones awareness of the God of suffering love, always a present force redeeming, healing, reconciling the world towards unity.

Tutu claims the words of the Christian mystic Julian of Norwich to proclaim ubuntu hope: In time, in the sweep and direction of history, all shall be well. All shall be one.

Interestingly, Tutu chooses midwifery as his metaphor for ubuntu ministry. Midwives accompany people through the time of fear and hope, pain and change from which new life is born. He writes: “As pastors, Mpho and I find one of our roles to be ‘midwives of meaning.’ We guide those in our care to discern a purpose in their challenges, in their suffering, and in their joy. We help people to construct a life that they can inhabit from the mosaic tiles of *their* experience.

The logic of Christian faith - indeed the logic of ubuntu - is that our lives are not all about us. In the deepest, most significant way, the goal of human life is not to wring the greatest personal pleasure out of every moment. The goal of human life is to live beyond the small, narrow prison of our own cares, wants and worries. By learning to choose what is good and right, we give ourselves the key to true freedom.”

What does ubuntu say to us on our Lenten journey through the cross-roads of conflict? That each time we find ourselves at a cross-roads, in a conflict, we have a choice to make. Will it be ‘me, me, me’ fearfully alone? Or will we turn to a path toward a widening community of ‘we’? Will we learn and practise the skills and prayers that lead to healing forgiveness? Will we fully engage our goodness - body, mind, soul and Spirit - seeking to widen the circle of kin-dom - of Kingdom - the expanding world community committed to compassion?

That path starts with daring to reveal our side of the story and really hear theirs. It risks uncovering all the emotions of both sides and discovering everyone’s unmet needs and core values. Egyptians and Hebrews alike. This process often requires a skilled mediator. Individuals and groups in conflict need a midwife to support them through the labour of reconciliation that can give birth to mutual compassion. The meaning that emerges out of the hard journey from conflict to resolution will hopefully be experienced as a lasting peace - and inner peace. With ubuntu faith we labour towards that resurrection rebirth, when there is no longer any enemy. Meeting everyone’s needs and honouring everyone’s values has become the common community of interest. Like the blacks and whites reconciling together in today’s South Africa.

This is Jesus' Kingdom thesis, as explained by John Crossan: that only the peace born of justice for all can endure. Facing his cross-road of conflict, he turned from retaliating against the Pax Romana, Rome's uneasy 'peace by the sword'. He midwived a new kin-dom of peace through his community of compassion.

Conflict resolution is Kingdom-building work. It can liberate us personally and change whole systems, like Pharaoh regimes - and even our families. (We'll talk about that next week.)

Kenneth Cloke writes: "The ultimate goal of conflict resolution is not to end conflicts, but to help people become better, more openhearted human beings, to resolve conflicts in ways that end in forgiveness and reconciliation, and to integrate peace with justice on a global scale."

Wasn't that what Jesus preached? Shalom: the peace of justice for all? After 2,000 years, perhaps, just in time to save the earth, we are getting sage enough to see how we might midwife his Kingdom vision today, to give birth to a new tomorrow.