

From Conflict to Reconciliation

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen. [Psalms 19:14]

On July 19th [2015], Fr. Malm took the Epistle lesson from Ephesians as the text for his sermon; and his theme was *Building up the Church*. In discussing unity, Fr. Malm referenced the affirmation that begins each Baptismal liturgy from the opening words of Chapter 4 of the Letter to the Ephesians: “*There is one body and one Spirit... one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all...*” and the passage a few verses later, that concisely defines the mission of the Church: “*...to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.*”

With that as a backdrop, Fr. Malm mentioned that “each and every day [he] seem[ed] to be involved in some degree of conflict, some hostility, some division, some misunderstanding.” He suggested that anger, competition, and the need to control, block reconciliation and make Christ’s call for unity, reconciliation, and forgiveness seem far off, and maybe impossible.

I would suggest that such conflicts and the need for reconciliation are not just present within the Church and among the Body of Christ, but are very present in the secular world. I sometimes joke that whenever two or more are gathered together, there will be conflict.

In commending Ephesians to our attention, Fr. Malm also said that he hoped that we would hear a couple of more sermons on Ephesians in the weeks ahead, so when I agreed to preach today, I thought I would take up that challenge.

In many respects, today’s text from Ephesians invites a further exploration of topics that Fr. Malm raised in his sermon on July 19th. Today’s Epistle begins to peel back the onion to reveal an outline of some of the hard work that is necessary to resolve conflict and achieve true and lasting reconciliation. I say outline, because for the most part, today’s text covers the “**what**” we should do, but is a bit thin on the **how we should do it**.

So, let’s take a look at what Paul exhorts us to do:

Paul says, “***Putting away all falsehoods, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.***”

Paul exhorts us to speak to “speak the truth to our neighbors...” Why speak the truth to our neighbors? For two reasons: first, because we are our brother’s and sister’s keepers and they our ours, as such we are and should be accountable to one another; and second, because it is fundamentally unhealthy to ignore or paper-over disputes and disagreements – as doing so will only cause them to fester – until they finally erupt in an unhealthy fashion.

While it is true that sometimes the truth can hurt, we should always endeavor to share it with love and compassion, and with a listening heart and open mind; understanding that our vision of the truth comes from our perspective and may not be completely accurate.

Paul says, “***Be angry, but do not sin...***”

For some Christians and some Christian communities, anger is considered a sin. However; Paul’s admonition is an acknowledgment that anger is a normal reaction to conflict; and channeled in a healthy way, can be part of a pathway to reconciliation. In fact, repressing anger – by bottling up ones emotions and pretending that the conflict does not exist – will only make matters worse and lead to more significant confrontations when those emotions finally reach their boiling point and cannot be contained; escalating the conflict and making reconciliation that much harder to reach. Paul understood this; and the phrasing of his admonition – “Be angry, but do not sin...” makes a clear demarcation between anger and sin. Jesus was clearly angry when he overturned the moneychanger’s tables. The Old Testament chronicles accounts where God was angry with his

people. However, God and Jesus got past anger, moved on, and did not allow their anger to fester and permanently close the door to relationship and reconciliation.

Paul says, ***“Do not let the sun go down on your anger and do not make room for the devil.”***

In Paul’s view, anger crosses over to sin when it becomes obsessive: when we make it personal, nurse it, hold a grudge, and seek revenge and retribution. This is where room is made for the devil and the Holy Spirit is grieved, by undermining Community of Christ, through estrangements in the Body of Christ that breaks off relationships by blocking avenues of reconciliation.

When we are angry is of course not the best time to seek reconciliation, but rather a time when it is best to step away from the situation and take time to cool off. But we should not wait too long before we seek conflict resolution, because conflicts left unresolved only fester and become breeding grounds for hard feelings and grudges.

I like Paul’s advice to *“not let the sun go down on your anger.”* I have heard this advice given to newlyweds and I too have shared it with newlyweds. Even when the conflict cannot be immediately resolved, it is healthy for a continuing relationship to forgive, put a bookmark on the conflict, and address it at a more appropriate time.

Paul says, ***“Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for the building up, as there is need...”***

Unfortunately, many of our national and world leaders and would-be leaders do not offer best role models of the behavior Paul endorses, and the constant barrage of disparagements and name-calling only serve to widen the gulf between and among the various camps and their positions – making compromise, conflict resolution, finding common-ground, and reconciliation all the more difficult and elusive. Further, the behavior of the leaders who practice this kind of discourse promotes enmity between the leader’s followers. Moreover, this kind of behavior is in stark contrast with the lessons we would want our children to learn about how they should resolve conflict in a healthy manner and reinforces inappropriate ways of settling differences.

Paul says, ***“Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”***

This portion of the text reminds me of a portion of a sermon Mother Steffensen preached not too long ago, wherein she said, about God’s peace, that once you share God’s peace with your neighbor, in preparation for coming to the Lord’s table, that any enmity between you and your neighbor is to be done, finished, put away, and reconciled.

While Mother Steffensen is certainly correct, for some conflicts, achieving reconciliation may be easier said than done. Often times, there are barriers to conflict resolution that need to be overcome, profound philosophical differences, or vastly different perceptions of reality; a lack of trust; anger and/or a desire to seek revenge stemming from deep-rooted and long-standing disagreements; a failure of the parties to listen to one another; ineffective communication; a need to win at all costs; an unwillingness to compromise and/or a “my way or the highway” attitude; a linkage between the present conflict and some unrelated and/or unresolved past issue; or other factors.

Sometimes, to get to that place where we can *“put away ... all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, [and forgive] one another, as God in Christ has forgiven [us],”* we need help. At those times, we should seek the counsel, advice, and guidance of a member of our clergy, one of our trained Stephen Ministers, a counselor, or a wise and trustworthy friend and confidant to guide us and help us get to that place where we can explore the nature of our conflict, develop healthy conflict resolution strategies, and be in a place where we can forgive, be forgiven, and be reconciled with our sisters and brothers in Christ.

Lord, grant us the spirit to think and do what is right and to live according to your will.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.