

“The Long and Winding Road to Reconciliation”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church
for Sunday, September 10, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

Scripture Readings: Psalm 149; Matthew 18:15-20
(Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

Some words have a very limited use, for they are linked to specific activities.

“Negotiations” is one of those words. It is associated with labour talks, but assumes that there is some equality in the process, or at least two sides that have some power in the negotiations, and will not be forced into a deal or agreement that they do not want.

That is why using the term of “negotiations” when a parent is seeking agreement on a destination for summer vacations or winter holidays, or maybe deciding what will be the menu for supper, is hardly negotiations. Parents ultimately have the authority to make the final decision regardless of the input. What can the children do to “negotiate” a different outcome? Go on strike? Refuse to pay their fair share? Withdraw their services? It simply does not work as a model for negotiations.

A word associated with certain types of negotiations is “conciliation” – usually a process that involves someone outside of the two negotiating parties who seeks a way forward to make sure there is an understanding of the two positions, and a way is established to seek agreement and a mutually acceptable resolution. It is an important process when negotiations go awry.

And now the term “reconciliation” has taken on specific power in terms of the process of seeking understanding and appreciation of aboriginal people within this country. While it has a specific force in our country, its intent is not insignificant – it speaks of finding a conciliatory interaction “again.”

I often ponder why that is so – that we seek “reconciliation” when often we hear that the relationship between aboriginal and non-aboriginal people in this country has been far from stellar. In actuality, there were many ways in which aboriginal people and non-aboriginals worked together in this land in the early years. One can just go down Highway 17 west to Fort St. Joseph and see historical displays as to how the British Troops of the late 18th and early 19th century worked with aboriginal people when they established that fort, and how aboriginal people even had homes on the Fort lands in exchange for their valuable skins and knowledge of the region.

In other words, reconciliation is only possible when there has been a conciliatory interaction in the past.

One of the unstated realities when people enter into counselling – family counselling, marriage counselling, financial counselling – is that it is difficult to have a beginning point if there never has been a sense of what life or relationships or financial management should be about in the first place. “I need to fix my family” may be a real request out of despair, but a statement such as “I want my family back” only makes sense if there was a sense of family originally. Many people live in situations of tension and turmoil, not knowing how

to escape it. They assume their reality is everyone's reality. But if "reconciliation" means that we are searching for a time of understanding and cooperation, then "reconciliation" may be the most important concept in a religious person's lexicon.

Jesus speaks about a sense of "reconciliation" in the passage read earlier by Dale. He calls for accountability among the members of the church, but ultimately he says that if we can find space for agreement and cooperation, even two people, then that can lead to life changing reality, and God's presence may be felt in the world.

"If only two or three are on board, we can make a difference?" Really?

Jack Lassenberry sees two people who fit the bill. Maury Kelman, a law professor at Wayne State University, who worked tirelessly for improving the law and calling people in power to accountability. The other person was Esther Shapiro, for many years the Consumer Affairs Director for the City of Detroit. Even up to her last year, at the age of 98 in 2016, she was being an advocate for others though she had retired almost 20 years earlier. She had been evicted with her husband from their apartment in Tacoma Washington when she was pregnant, because it was learned that they had had black people over for dinner. That was what led them to move to Detroit, where in 1947 they met a young black union organizer named Coleman Young, who later became Mayor of Detroit and who appointed Esther as his Consumer Affairs Director for the city.

Dr. Alexandra Greenhill also named two people as her personal heroes – Dr. Maya Angelou and Dr. Christine Simard. Angelou is a well-known black author made more famous through Oprah Winfrey, a popular writer and inspiring poet. Dr. Simard did 6 tours of duty outside of Canada, including four in Afghanistan, where often she was the only surgeon available, and would perform incredible operations in order to save lives in very rustic conditions.

Jesus said it only takes two or three to make a difference, but in some cases one person can truly make a difference if others are there to help the cause.

I wonder if the political and organizational tradition of not allowing business in a meeting unless there is a mover and a seconder for a motion comes from this basic principle. We need at least two people in order to make an impact on a meeting, and on a community, that can decide the future direction.

In the last British Election the riding of Fife North East elected a Scottish National Party member by 2 votes over the Liberal Democrat – the Conservative and Labour candidates trailed. Ernie Eves, who went on to become Treasurer and even Premier of Ontario, won his first election in Parry Sound by 6 votes – earning the nickname "Landslide Ernie."

A reviewer of the Double Tree by Hilton Hotel in Goa was prepared to write a nasty review except that two people made a difference in her stay – servers Miguel and Rahul brought delight in a visit that otherwise was seen as less than favourable for the guests, and so praise rather than condemnation came in the review.

Yes one or two – or three or four or eight or ten people – can make a difference. Our goal is to align ourselves with those who seek a difference that enhances God’s purposes and supports God’s goodness in the world.

We are invited to “reconcile ourselves anew” to the way of life to which God invites us.

So find an ally and get on with it. That was what the church in action is all about, according to Jesus.