

Justice and Reconciliation

By Elizabeth Kaeton

FOR A LITTLE OVER TWO YEARS, I was on the Core Team of a grassroots organization of the Episcopal Church that came to be known as the New Commandment Task Force (NCTF). There were six members on the Core Team: Three identified with the liberal and progressive movements in the church and three identified with the conservative, evangelical and orthodox segments of ECUSA; two were female, two were retired, one identified as a lesbian and one identified as a gay man.

Our charge was to come together to try and find a way to reconcile our differences. We met a total of five times, in Washington state, New Jersey, Texas, California and Indiana. We were careful to invite as near a balance as we could of liberal, moderate and conservative people, balancing clergy and laity, male and female, gay, lesbian and straight, with a special eye for those who held positions of leadership in the church — especially deputies to General Convention.

I came into the group with an untested but firmly held assumption that justice and reconciliation were probably mutually exclusive. The only thing I could be reconciled with was the gospel of justice. If reconciliation meant that I had to give up my rights, or my hopes, or my dreams, well, it just wasn't worth the cost. "No justice, no peace" was a bumper sticker that had attached itself to the very fiber of my heart.

Imagine my surprise when I discovered that my conservative, evangelical and orthodox brothers and sisters felt very much the same way — except, of course, from their perspective. The only thing they could be reconciled with was the gospel of righteous life in Christ. If they had to give up their understanding of the elements of a "sober, godly and righteous life," well, reconciliation just wasn't worth the cost. For them, that meant a compromise of gospel values that would lead to the sure and certain road to perdition.

We began each session by having each attendee respond to the question: Who are you and who is Jesus for you? The latter part of that question proved to be the most important any of us would answer. Some conservatives assumed that liberals couldn't possibly know

Jesus, and that if we did, it was certainly some distortion of the truth. Some liberals assumed that conservatives couldn't possibly know Jesus, for if they did, they would certainly be more concerned about justice. Imagine our surprise to discover our own idolatry! Once we were able to see Christ in each other, the labels we placed on each other became more and more irrelevant. We began to be open to the opportunity to listen and hear what each other had to say.

Confession was another important piece of our work together. In one exercise, we had to break into our own theologically affiliated groups and make a list first of what wrong we felt had been done to us by the other. Then, we had to reverse the process and make a list of what wrong we felt we had done to the other. It was difficult, painful and humbling work. And it was one of the most important catalysts moving us to seeing each other as human beings. A powerful liturgy of prayer and confession always followed this, which left many of us feeling open and vulnerable, but clean, renewed and, ultimately, hopeful.

Peace at any price

The most difficult part of our time together, however, came immediately after this experience, when in a situation similar to divorce counseling, we had to determine what we were willing to sacrifice in order to end the relationship. The other side of the question, of course, was what did we need to do in order to make the relationship work.

The temptation, no matter which side of the theological ground you called home, was to survey the land below from this very lofty place where we had caught a glimmer of the Promised Land of Reconciliation, and throw everything away in order to attain it. Or, to wish the other would. And then become angry because the other didn't. And then, it seemed, we were right back to where we had started.

We discovered, in that moment, that each of us was living out the gospel story of the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. "The devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed

him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor, and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me'" (Matthew 4:8-9).

It would seem that the House of Bishops' Theology Committee reached a similar place. By their own admission, they had become more concerned with the relationships they had built with each other, and with at least maintaining the illusion of the unity of the worldwide Anglican Communion, than the imperatives of the Gospel. Instead of "waging reconciliation" they capitulated to the temptation of "peace at any price" — even if that cost was the very soul of the Gospel.

Bonhoeffer would have called that capitulation "cheap grace." Naim Ateek, the founder and director of the Sabeel Ecumenical Liberation Theology Center in East Jerusalem, would put it a bit differently. "At Sabeel," he says, "we work for justice, peace and reconciliation. Reconciliation is the third of three important prongs. It is the last stage in a sequence that begins with the establishment of justice. When justice is done, it produces peace, and peace sets in motion the process of reconciliation.

"It is right that the church must point to the ultimate goal," says Ateek. "We must not be satisfied with the doing of justice, because that might be perceived as harsh and retaliatory against the oppressor. We must not even stop with peace, because that can be cold and entail the separation of the two sides and the building of walls between them. We must press on for reconciliation because it is the only way that can restore both sides' humanity and bring healing and new relationships and open a brighter future for both."

Reversing Micah's order

The ancient prophet has told us what the Lord requires of us. It is a simple formula, really: "Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). What I have learned is that it really begins in reverse order. Walking humbly — or attentively — with God is the first requirement in learning how to love mercy, or kindness. That process begins in humility because it requires one essential ingredient: truth. It is humbling and often humiliating to tell the truth about yourself. Often, it means a process of embracing not only what is bad, but what is good about your life. For some, the latter is the more difficult task.

Walking humbly with God means telling the truth about who you are and your faith story. It means living the truth about yourself and your life. It means being the truth about yourself no matter how difficult that is for you or how uncomfortable that makes others. Even if that truth leads to Jerusalem, Gethsemane and Golgotha. And the truth is, it often does.

Walking humbly, attentively, with God in the way of the cross softens the heart to love mercy. Loving mercy often means accepting the truth about yourself. That opens the possibility of accepting the truth about others. About *an other*. Truth we may

not want to accept. If someone is allowed to be too different from me, to love differently than me, to imagine God differently from me, what does that do to my understanding of my self and my God? "Jesus, Jesus, who's got the Jesus?" Bishop Steve Charleston asked in a sermon preached at the Triennial Integrity Eucharist at the cathedral in Denver in 2000. It's a slippery slope from self-love to idolatry — to giving shape and form and claiming ownership of "the truth first revealed." Which is why the one and only "new" commandment Jesus gave us was "love one another as I have loved you."

Follow that commandment and the entire climate of relationships begins to change. Difference is embraced. Diversity is honored. Kindness is allowed to prevail. Relationships deepen and change. Community grows and flourishes. Individual lives are transformed. Unity can be achieved without adherence to uniformity.

And the impulse to do what is right, to do justice, naturally follows. The prophetic mandate to "do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with God" is required precisely because it establishes the groundwork for reconciliation, which is the mission of the church.

"Waging reconciliation" — a mass theological tranquilizer?

"Waging reconciliation" has become a popular buzz phrase in the Episcopal Church. Many of its proponents use it as a kind of mass theological tranquilizer. It is offered as the antidote to the anxiety that rises when people in the church try to tell their truth and that truth is not wanted and not accepted, because it disturbs the delicate equilibrium of the institution. It can be heard as a mandate to "Do nothing, love the status quo and walk invisibly in the church."

Waging reconciliation is difficult because the work that precedes it is daunting. The powers of the world do not want to work this hard. As Ateek says, "They want peace without justice and reconciliation without truth. Justice and truth frighten them."

If I learned nothing else from my work with the New Commandment Task Force, I learned that reconciliation requires bold risk-taking and courageous, sacrificial love. It is not about making nice, but being real. It is not about changing anyone but myself, by allowing the transformative power of the Holy Spirit to help me love the truth about myself as God loves me, so that I may learn to love the truth about others as God loves them. It's about justice, not "just us."

The prophet Isaiah long ago recognized that "the doing of justice will be peace, and the effect of justice will be security and trust forever" (Isaiah 32:17). Let us wage this kind of reconciliation in ourselves first, and in our church, so that we may be agents of the mission of God's reconciliation in the world. ●

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