

Christian Conflict Resolution

Homily Resource for the 23rd Sunday In Ordinary Time
September 4, 2005

Scripture Readings: Ezekiel 33:7-9; Psalm 95:1-2,6-9; Romans, Mathew 18:15- 20



My message for the readings this weekend can be summarized by quoting Ephesians 4:15 which reminds us that the standard God has given us is to “speak the truth in a spirit of love.”

Jesus gives us a very practical step by step process in order to handle conflicts when they arise. If people would honor and follow this process we would have a much healthier society. Going to our brother or sister first when we have a problem helps us to avoid gossip and spreading further conflict and division among other people. Unfortunately, many people continue to lower the standards of conduct in the world around us. I emphasized that God has raised the standard and as members of the Body of Christ we must model this kind of behavior for others to see.

Being fond of the number three, I came up with three steps to go through when trying to work through a problem with someone.

Step #1: Pray to disarm your ego – When someone does something to offend us, out of a sense of disappointment and hurt, we often immediately question our own worth and value and start putting the focus on ourselves. This clouds our ability to be objective and to realize when someone resorts to some vicious tactic or comment that is a reflection of their character and not our own. Disarming our ego allows us to be objective and to immediately not make the problem all about us.

Here's an example of how you might disarm your ego: Let's say someone comes up to you at work and starts criticizing and knit-picking at you. At some point you realize that this person is having a bad day and you happen to be the closest punching bag. After a brief moment of prayer, you approach the person and tell them that you would be happy to meet with them over lunch or some other time to talk with them about what is going on. You don't spend the rest of the morning brooding over their actions because your ego has been disarmed and you realize that they have a problem and you can try to help them work through the problem but you have decided you're not going to let them get to you and take away your peace. You have prayed and you are confident that God will help you help them work through whatever difficulties have come up. The situation may have something to do with you it may not. (Figuring that out is related to step 2.)

I have frequently had to learn to disarm my ego with people who come up to me after Mass. Someone may hear something in my homily that triggers an emotional reaction. Very often they hear something I didn't actually say, but various circumstances have permitted them to come into Mass with an agenda.

They come out as soon as Mass is over and get into my face to challenge me. As the person makes their remarks I immediately pray and realize this isn't the time to handle the situation. I tell the person I would be happy to meet with them at a later time for an appointment, hand them a business card and encourage them to call me later. I also encourage us to be in prayer about this until we meet. If I didn't disarm my ego, I would immediately start arguing with them in front of everyone and would probably allow their problem to destroy the peace God had just given me during the Mass. Our ego is always waiting to step out and brood over the injury and put the focus on ourselves. This makes us miserable and we suddenly allow people with their problems to control us and drag us down.

Disarming our ego helps us avoid being led around the neck by an emotional response and helps us be objective and calm as we continue through the process of conflict resolution. Of course, I must note that sometimes this process doesn't come so quickly. When you experience an extreme let-down or disappointment it can sometimes take days (maybe even weeks) to disarm your ego. Other times it can come quickly. The most important thing is to pray our way through the challenges and as the Nike commercial used to say "just do it!" We should never go to someone and confront them without first disarming our ego.

Step #2: Praying for accountability: Before we ever go to someone to work something out, we have an obligation to pray about our accountability in whatever went wrong. There may be times when someone's issue is their issue between us, but we very well may have contributed to the deterioration of the relationship through our own selfish actions. We must ask the Holy Spirit to reveal any accountability we have in what went wrong and be willing to offer a word of apology. So often, people get more concerned about being right and not being contrite! Our Lord reminds us that we must first take the plank out of our own eye before seeking to remove the speck from our brother's eye. I have been shocked sometimes when I reach this step and think I have all the facts laid out to discover the Holy Spirit bringing to the surface something cruel or mean-spirited I said or did and conveniently forgot about. This step ensures that we prayerfully try and get to the core of what is wrong based on the facts and not the emotional response (step 1). We can then go to the person prepared to calmly and responsibly talk about achieving a solution and hopefully reconciliation having prayerfully examined our own accountability.

Step #3: Praying for boldness or the anointing of the Holy Spirit: Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to help us in our weakness and to allow us to live up to the commandment (which was clearly stated in the Second Reading) to love our neighbor enough to go to them first and speak the truth in a spirit of love. We so often worry about how people or going to respond to us and try to anticipate the outcome. Sometimes this allows fear to get into our lives.

We counteract this fear by remembering the words of St. Paul to St. Timothy:

For this reason, I remind you to stir into flame the gift of God that you have through the imposition of my hands. For God did not give us a spirit

of cowardice but rather of power and love and self-control. (2 Timothy 1:7)

Before we ever go to someone to work something out, we pray to the Holy Spirit to fill us with wisdom, to give us the appropriate words, to bless the person who wronged us, and most importantly, to bind away any fear. Difficult conversations go much more smoothly when we pray for the Spirit of the Lord to be poured out upon us to guide and help us. So often we forget this step. When Jesus told us that the Holy Spirit would speak through us during persecutions, he wasn't teaching us that asking for the Holy Spirit's help was limited to those moments. St. Jude reminds us to "pray constantly in the power of the Holy Spirit."(verse 20). We experience great empowerment and confidence to handle the difficulties and conflicts of life with the help of the Holy Spirit so that we can say with St. Paul, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (Philippians 4:13) Here is a sample prayer you might say before confronting someone about a problem that has come between you.

God of mercy, I give you thanks and praise for always loving me enough to expect that best in me and to call me to be a healer and reconciler. In your name I ask for a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit to help me speak the truth in a spirit of love to my brother or sister so that we can work through the current challenge that has come between us. Give me a humble and contrite heart and remove any fear that is within me. Give me wisdom and understanding, but most of all a genuine love for my brother or sister. Help me to let go of any desire to be vengeful but only to use words that build up and never tear down. May my only motive be to follow your example and teaching so that together we may experience healing and the grace of reconciliation. I pray for my brother or sister that you fill them with confidence and remove any fear they may have as we work through this process you have given us. May we discover your will in our relationship and strive to be a model for others in showing how you truly help us work through differences and achieve peace of mind and heart. I ask this with confidence through Christ our Lord.

Conclusion: It is important for us to honor this process. There will obviously be times when we cannot achieve reconciliation because that depends on the cooperation of both people, but we must do what Christ has instructed us on our part. If after you go to the person who has wronged you and tried this process, the next step may be to get a mediator of some kind who can be objective and help you try and further work through the problem at hand. If you can't work through it after that, then the Lord tells us to move on and realize that reconciliation may not be possible at that time. Pray for it in the future and be open to extending that grace to the individual. We can't be responsible for how people will respond to the process. We simply must honor it and do our part to speak the truth in a spirit of love. I know I feel like I have done the right thing as a Christian when I honor this process and sometimes reconciliation comes later on and sometimes it doesn't. We are accountable for our conduct and behavior. This process ensures we honor the teaching of the Lord It's a real shame when we

don't love people enough to go to them and try and work things out. This is a core cause of the disunity we see in the world and the Church today. The standard has been set, may we strive always to follow it and discover that God will give us all of the grace we need to go through each step.