

## **Peacemaking as truthful seeing, truthful hearing, truthful speaking**

*“So then putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbours, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger.”*

Ephesians 4: 25:26

Why do we find ourselves in conflict with those we love the most, as well as those we don't even know? Is being in conflict the human condition? Are we unable to be in relationship without chafing at each other, irritation in virtue of proximity? Perhaps. But then again, it should not seem surprising that conflict might be the normal mode of human interaction when there seems to be few people, if any, who are content and calm within themselves. Why would we expect to avoid conflict with others when each of us carries many hurts and needs that seem to have no resolution. This is where peacemaking begins. It begins in truth, in acknowledging that wherever we go and whatever we do, conflict seems to come along with us. It begins in acknowledging that we can never live in peace if we do not see ourselves as participating, even if unknowingly, in the unhealthy conflict that hurts us and the world we live in. Ephesians gives us this starting point: we are in this together. We are never isolated, either in our peace or our violence, from other people. We are all members of one another. Ephesians also describes the consequence of our interconnectedness. We will be angry with one another. But, and here we get at the heart of peacemaking, anger is unavoidable, and probably necessary, but as members of one another we do not let our anger fester. We do not let it secretly grow (for anger grows best in secret) because it will devour us too.

If then, conflict is inevitable, what hope is there for peaceful homes, marriages and countries? Conflict may be inevitable, but it is not the antithesis of peace, but rather one part of a relational dynamic that can become a harmony rather than a cacophony. Conflict need not be unhealthy, and at its simplest, most redeemed sense, conflict means simply the meeting of differences. It is what we do when we are in conflict with each other that either turns our conflict into violence or into deeper interconnectedness.

### **Why is it hard to resolve conflict in healthy ways?**

Probably the simplest reason why we are so bad at resolving conflict in ways that promote health and life is because it is difficult and time consuming. We all live with varying degrees and kinds of brokenness that contribute to our interpersonal strife, but for the most part these things can be accounted for (sometimes with great difficulty) by taking the time to engage with each other, hear each other and acknowledge our role in relational breakdown. This is very hard, and we tend not to do hard things. But even more importantly, we are bad at resolving conflict because we do not see things as they are. We take our observations about events and people at face value without recognizing the effects our unspoken assumptions have on influencing what we see. The terms we associate with people and use to describe events set in motion the logic of our judgments well before we come to make observations about the way things are. So before you can ask yourself, 'what should I do?' you need to ask yourself, 'how should I see?' Jesus, the genius teacher that he was, makes exactly this point in the story about the good Samaritan. When asked for a rule or a principle to guide ethical (i.e. proper Jewish) decision making, Jesus responds with a parable about the assumptions we make when we identify

people. When we ask the question, who is my neighbour, we begin with a set of boundaries reinforced by descriptions. Jesus points out that our expectations about what answers are possible are given by these descriptions and their associated limitations. Moral of the story: in God's creation, i.e. how Jesus sees the world, these boundaries do not exist.

### **Learning to see.**

With some effort, because it is always difficult to look inward, we may be able to recognize how our thought life frames our perceptions of events and other people. Although it may at first seem strange and maybe even insulting, it is our inner speech acts, our personal psychological narratives, that motivate so much of our interpersonal dynamics. Why do we ignore that friend? 'He is a jerk,' we think, and therefore he deserves it. Why do we yell at our kids? 'They have been given enough opportunities to put their toys away.' (and therefore deserve a yelling). Why do we shoot unarmed black teenagers? Dump drunk natives at the side of the road outside town? Tell women to dress less slutty? Because we have a story that justifies our behaviour, a story about how the world works, what roles different characters play, and who deserves which outcomes. And the words we use build these stories, shape these images, and drive our actions.

It is not easy to overcome the immediacy of the visible and tangible, and to believe that unseen thoughts and ideas have power over perception. It feels like the world and all its affairs is 'given' to us; it is something we seem to experience directly without the mediating effects of experiential mechanisms, i.e. ideas, thoughts, expectations, etc. But this idea is a false one. All that we know is known through an interpretive lens, and not only that but our experiences can be influenced to tell us a story about reality that is not true. If this were not so, magicians would not be able to do what they do. Modern psychology and the scientific study of our sensory and memory systems confirms what these manipulators have known for a long time: our sensory systems are not infallible and can be induced into producing a curated experience. We claim to see what is not there, and not see what is there. The same is true of our memory. We store information that is relevant to the demands and priorities of the moment, completely subjectively. Likewise, we recall according to the priorities of our current situation. It is well known to scientists, although not to politicians, that the psychological duress of torture is not a tool best suited to recovering the truth; it is a tool that creates a solution to the problem of being tortured, that is, people recall information that may save them.

### **Recognition of our fallibility (epistemic humility) enables us to hear anew.**

Having an important belief criticized or disproved is emotionally destabilizing. And it is for that reason most people are not willing to give up ideas about themselves or how the world works, despite all evidence to the contrary. It is painful to have your inner life deconstructed, especially when we might have lived with certain ideas for a very long time, and made many decisions, possibly even building our lives around these ideas. Perhaps though this is the very thing Jesus calls us to do. Perhaps this is the very thing that Jesus has always called people to do. Let go of your fear of being wrong, he says. It is better to risk, admitting we might have believed the wrong thing and to hear the unsettling truth, than it is to remain in control and miss out. Of course adopting an attitude of epistemic humility, recognizing we have not always known the truth, does not mean that we have to stop believing everything we think is good and right.

What it means is that we work extra hard at hearing other points of view, hearing other stories. When we come to hear other people with a rigid sense of what (and who) is right we do not listen, we take words in through our ears and route them directly to our mouth. Again, being members of one body means that in order to be heard, we must practice hearing. If we long to have our story known, perhaps a story of pain and woundedness, we must make sure that we also listen carefully to others' stories and hear anew their story, which may also contain hidden pain. And even more than this, we need to recognize that many people do not feel safe to share their story, and that it may take some uncomfortable active listening, and safe-space making in order to hear everyone's story. Unfortunately in the church, as elsewhere, there is plenty of coercive silence, where power is used to prevent stories from being told. Usually this is done in unobvious and hidden ways, the typical mode of evil.

### **The beginning.**

The Christian vision of God's creative power begins at the beginning in Genesis. God speaks and existence exists, all bumping, glowing, slimy and spectacular existence. The gospel of John reminds us of the semantic nature of God's creating: in the beginning was the logos, the word and the thing that is God. And for those of us not present at such auspicious occasions as the creation of the universe or the birth of our saviour, we find a connection to this logos God-thing-person in the words of the bible. Stories told, repeated, performed, and remembered are the essential core of our continuing relationship with all the people and things that have gone before us and these stories have contributed to our picture of God and ourselves. We should be no strangers then to the idea that we live in a story, or in lots of stories, some of which we know, some of which we do not. But this sense of participating in a story seems to have been forgotten, or at least what has been forgotten is the idea that our version of a story may not be the most truthful or most beneficial one. We might remember and enjoy the idea that God has a story in mind for us (hopefully a story of blessing and plenty!) but in all likelihood we forget that we somehow have a propensity to see ourselves as having roles and qualities that we do not have. In light of this, and in light of the ongoing way in which followers of the prince of peace seem to find themselves just as divorced, depressed, and violent as everyone else, it is probably appropriate to consider the way in which some of our stories are not the most truthful, merciful and Christ-like way of seeing the world. Perhaps we will find that in doing so we will lose some of the things that we like having and gain some things we don't, but perhaps we will also find that many of the reasons for being divorced, depressed and violent are also lost.