

Relentlessly Redemptive

Matthew 18:15-20

One of the more thoughtful perspectives I've read in reaction to the brutal beheading of two American journalists by ISIS militants came in Friday's edition of *The New York Times* by columnist David Brooks. Instead of focusing on the political arguments for going after these terrorists militarily (which are commonly heard nowadays), Brooks paid attention to the perplexing problem with religious fanaticism.

Our revulsion makes us different from the religious zealots who are prone to commit or celebrate acts like beheadings. The zealots often hew to a fringe of their faith that holds that the spirit and the body are at war with each other. They have a tendency to extreme asceticism, to seek to deny themselves pleasures of the living world, to celebrate the next world at the expense of this world, to oscillate between masochistic self-flagellation, when they think they have been sensual, and bouts of arrogant spiritual pride, when they convince themselves they have risen above the senses. It doesn't matter to them what they do to their enemy's body, because this physical reality is not important.

If ISIS is to be stopped, there will probably have to be some sort of political and military coalition. But, ultimately, the Islamists are a spiritual movement that will have to be surmounted by a superior version of Islam.¹

I firmly agree with Brooks, because it is a battle over worldviews, not one over military strategy or strength. Most Muslims, themselves, are outraged by this brutal movement within Islam. The national director of the Council of American-Islamic Relations wrote an editorial in the current edition of *Time* magazine portraying ISIS and groups like them as not only un-Islamic, but anti-Islamic, disguising themselves as religious, when they're only militant thugs. My friend, Mongi Dhaouadi, who lives in New London but works in Washington, D.C. at the Center for the Study of Islam and

¹ David Brooks, "The Body and the Spirit," *The New York Times*, September 5, 2014.

Democracy, has been making this point for quite some time, including when the only impression most Americans had of Islam was from the threat from Osama bin Laden and members of al-Qaeda. Mongi and others are among the growing chorus of Muslim voices condemning not only the violence, but the distortion of Islam by these and other militant terrorists. It's hard to tolerate those who you think completely misrepresent, if not undermine, the values and beliefs and religious tradition that you hold dear.

Any student of history will remind us these militants are not unique. There are other similar groups in various regions of the world, who operate on the margins in countries we don't pay much attention to. Some of those regions include violence done by Christians (as I've noted in our work in Chiapas, Nagaland (northeast India), Burma, Liberia, Rwanda, Angola, Congo, and elsewhere). Of course, it wasn't long ago when senseless killing occurred between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, not to mention the violence in this country committed by right-wing militias claiming to be Christian.

As the 20th century theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, put it: "The tendency to claim God as an ally and ends is the source of all religious fanaticism." All three Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) are struggling with their faiths being defined and distorted by fanatics. So before we cast a stone in the direction of Islam, we might remind ourselves that Christians have committed many crimes over the centuries in the name of their religion regardless of the teachings of our faith.

Most people distance themselves from such fanaticism, and rightly so. Even if we have grievances with others over how things should be, we aren't likely to rise up and resort to violence or crusade to explicitly harm others. We hear about those who are like that, but most of us prefer to avoid problems or walk away from conflict than to directly confront another over differences. We're at the other end of the spectrum from fanatics. Many of us are conflict *avoiders*!

However, avoidance doesn't seem to be a very satisfactory solution to conflict, either. Conflict doesn't disappear; it gets buried within us as resentment or fear until the next confrontation. As Self-Help author Bryant McGill puts it,

Conflict avoidance often causes greater conflict. ...
You can't avoid what you fear, because what you fear is inside you. ²

He's right—conflict avoidance doesn't really avoid the conflict, because the relational problems remain deeply imbedded in our consciousness and spirit. Like a dog gnawing on a bone, the troubles that haunt us individually eat away at our spirits with underlying discomfort, fear, and anxiety that are not easily forgotten.

For this reason, therapists will tell us that conflict is best handled by coming to terms with it and addressing the sources and then mutually finding constructive ways to overcome it—in other words, a remarkable contrast to targeting your enemy as militants do or avoiding conflict like most of us do. Ideally, the hostile relationships would transform into interactions that build trust. This is the objective of conflict transformation, which advances people

² Bryant McGill, *Simple Reminders: Inspiration for Living Your Best Life*,

beyond the standard model of conflict resolution, where fixing the problem is the sole focus.

In conflict transformation, the attention is on the broken relationship and finding ways to mutually and constructively build trust in order to solve a problem, or live with it peacefully when it can't be resolved. In conflict transformation, the relationship is transformed in such a way that adversaries build trust between them and move beyond the anger and resentment which fuels the antagonism and magnifies the presenting issue or problem.

As a Christian, I not only believe in this approach to problem-solving and conflict, I sense it was very much a part of the early Christian ethic in dealing with differences between people, especially within the Christian churches, where disagreements over theology, practice, ethical standards, moral behavior, and apostolic authority often paralyzed their growth and development as emerging religious communities. Certainly, in many of Paul's letters there is evidence of cranky relationships and communal division. I'll be exploring some of this in my upcoming Bible Study on Corinthians beginning later in the month.

However, for this morning, I'd like to explore the teachings of Jesus that appear to suggest something akin to conflict transformation, as evidenced by what we read in our lectionary text for today. I say, "Jesus' teaching," but because the "church" as an entity didn't exist at the time Jesus lived, it's clear that the "Jesus voice" in this passage is really of the Gospel writer himself or the leaders of their Syrian community, assuming Jesus would have said the same. What are these instructions?

If another member of the church sins against you [or you have a grievance against them], go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.

In other words, keep it private. What's the point? As we all know, bringing in others only inflames situations and distorts what is or is not said. So the point is, don't allow a private upset become a larger problem that impacts relationships. Everyone has conflicts, but they aren't everyone's business!

This seems like common sense, but it isn't as common as we think! What do most people do when they are offended? Typically, they stew over it, even when they're "playing nice." Like that dog bone, resentment is something we gnaw on. Or, we choose to vent to someone else, usually to garner their support for our side. It no longer is a private matter, nor is the upset addressed when it needs to be. That's why this biblical instruction is, deal with it immediately in a private way—no avoidance, no complaining to others to vent or enlist their support, and no public airing of the grievances. Keep matters simple and private between the two of you. Don't let them needlessly ruin relationships.

If that doesn't work in resolving the situation, then the instruction is, you may bring others into it, but only to confirm the accuracy of what is being said, not to take a side in the conflict. That's critically important, even in conflict transformation, because when emotions run high, the conflicted parties tend to become selective listeners—we hear what will support our view and overlook the rest. Or we will take something out of context and render a distorted report of what occurred. The benefit of bringing others to listen to the two in conflict is to get as much information and objectivity into

the process as possible. Conflicts can often be averted by relying on accurate information and truth-telling. Again, the grievance may or may not be justified; but it will usually take someone more objective than the offended one to see things as they truly are.

However, if the issue is larger than between two people and problematic for the entire community, then the matter requires a more public airing.

If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church, and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

Now as historic church discipline, this is where terrible mistakes have been made that have grievously missed the point. This single verse has provoked and justified all sorts of harm done to people: excommunication, exclusion, shaming, shunning, harassment, and at times, punitive measures that included physical harm and even death. Extend that outward to those outside of Christendom and it often was much worse in various Crusade-like purges of those who didn't confess the faith or were deemed immoral. The sad thing is, it still goes on.

This was never the intent behind these words of instruction. For one thing, Gentiles and tax collectors were already a part of the early church, so to imply that they were marginalized or excluded and deserving of punishment is wrong! What the verse calls for is this: to be treated as a "Gentile" or "tax collector" meant viewing these individuals as one needing instruction on the faith and particularly in how their actions, attitude, or customs undermined the truth or aspirations of their faith. Gentiles and representatives of the imperial order were harder to convert to the social standards and teachings of

a predominantly Jewish moral culture, which the early church was. The point being, if offenders were unable to reconcile with the church, then the church should treat them like novices, meaning with great patience and gracious tolerance, remaining engaged with them until they resolved the matter and restored the relationship. There's no expulsion from the community, per se, but something more akin to "probation" where there was an intentional working through of the differences trusting in God's Spirit to bring about reconciliation.

Now, I agree, this text presupposes the church is always in the right, which I'm not sure is always the case. But nevertheless, the spirit behind this approach is deliberately redemptive, not punitive, toward those with whom they differed. There's not an ounce of retribution in it. Likewise, there was no avoidance of the conflict, but rather engagement until there could be a positive outcome through the transformation of their relationships.

The belief that underscored this constructive approach to conflict was summed up in verse 20: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." We often use this line in a cliché manner when everyone agrees and shares a united spirit. But in truth this saying is in reference to times when conflict and division abound and a constructive, cooperative approach to resolving that conflict must be employed. Because when two or more are gathered (and it takes two or more people to be in a fight!), if they are engaged in a process of reconciliation, then Christ is present in its spirit.

The presence of Christ is found in the spirit of reconciliation, not retribution. It is in the constructive engagement with our

adversaries where Christ is found, reflecting the redemptive nature of the Spirit of God. We are to be relentless in our efforts to reconcile and redeem our relationships with our adversaries (to go the second mile, as it were), for that is where God will be found—the Christ Spirit who will heal broken lives.

For me, that's my religion; that is Christianity in practice as a faith and as a prophetic challenge to the world. It's a far cry from fanaticism because it values those with whom we have our differences and it is anything but avoidance because it addresses conflict, but in a caring and considerate and charitable way. It is relentlessly redemptive.

This is precisely what fanaticism of any type cannot cultivate—constructive engagement with differences. That's why fanatics are usually destructive and dangerous. However we choose to deal with extremists in the secular world, may we not lose this standard for how we deal with differences in our spiritual homes. For the positive witness we make as Christians may in fact change the hearts and save the souls, not only of those who oppose us, but our own as well.

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