

SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY, February 16, 2020
“ Path to Reconciliation” (Matthew 5:21-26)

I had heard quite a bit about High School before I made the transition. Both my big brother and sister had attended Oakville Trafalgar, and were willing to share information about teachers, lockers, and class rotation. On my first day, I was nervous - would I remember my combination and be able to find my way - entire Grade 9's had been known to get lost in the maze of corridors. Adding to my stress was an awareness that while physical education in public school involved playing baseball and soccer in the good weather, and basketball and volleyball in the bad, in High School, it would be much more structured. Why we would even be marked on our performance. Since I was in the midst of a growth spurt with little in the way of co-ordination, let alone athleticism, this was a daunting prospect.

We started with track and field. Our teacher demonstrated high jump - the scissor kick was the only approach back then. She set the bar, and said we would have to clear this height for a passing grade. I walked up; turned sideways, and stepped over. There were cries of “unfair”; “set the bar higher for her”, but I got my pass. The easiest one ever.

When Jesus says: “you have heard that it was said in ancient times, “You shall not kill”, I feel as if I am sauntering up to that low bar. Yes, scholars have spilled a great deal of ink over whether the Hebrew word should be translated as “kill”, suggesting that all taking of life is wrong or as “murder”, meaning “unlawful killing”, leaving the door open for the taking of life under certain circumstances like in what is termed a just war or capital punishment or self-defence. As a child,

learning the ten commandments, this one, number six, seemed the easiest. I might slide into coveting my neighbour's brand new three speed bicycle or be tempted to spread some juicy gossip. I might not always honour my parents. My father would sometimes cite this commandment when he felt I was not showing sufficient respect or to use my Mom's expression - I was being "cheeky". My Mom still sometimes calls me cheeky even though I assure her it is not possible at my advanced age. My honouring the Sabbath day can crumble when work or chores or shopping invade this time that is to be set aside for worship, rest and finding the quiet centre. But I have never come close to wishing anyone dead, let alone acting to bring that about. What a nice low bar.

Back in High School, with the coming of late Fall, we moved inside for gymnastics. Now, I am convinced that the creator of gymnastics had it in for tall, uncoordinated women. I wiped out on the balance beam, and failed to make it over the horse. But the worst was floor exercises. I could do a front summersault alright, but try as I might I could not make it up to a straddle stand. Finally, I called the teacher over to watch me and tell me what I was doing wrong. She shook her head: "with your body build, it is impossible." And yet, she remained adamant: without this maneuver I could not pass that level. I was doomed.

I have that same sinking feeling as I listen to Jesus: "but I say to you, anyone who is angry with a neighbour shall be liable to judgement." Is there anyone here who can honestly say: "I have never been angry with a neighbour"? When you are out driving, and you have to stand on your brakes because someone has cut you off. When you are in the theatre or cinema and someone

keeps crackling their candy wrapper or talking at crucial moments. When your next door neighbour decides to host a raucous party till the wee hours, and you have to get up early the next day. When you are doing a group project, and the others keep promising to help, but they never do. When you feel you are not being heard or appreciated or recognized. You get the idea.

Anger is one of our natural human emotions. How we handle it depends on our culture and upbringing. We may have learned that it is an emotion to be vented in door slamming and yelling or expressed in reasoned “I” statements accompanied by a specific example like “I feel angry when you squeeze the toothpaste in the middle.” We may have been taught that it is a bad emotion which should always be suppressed and preferably denied: “Angry? Oh no, I’m not angry”, we declare through tight lips. But the reality is all of us feel angry at times. When Jesus broadens “you shall not murder” to include anger, the bar is suddenly raised high.

Anger can lead to withdrawal. That is the usual approach in my family: we go out for a walk or if we cannot physically get away, we retreat into silence, refusing to engage the other until our equanimity has been restored. Anger can lead to words being spoken which never should have been voiced - words that insult, that hurt, that create festering wounds. We may say: “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” However, that isn’t true. Either way, relationships can be broken. And yet, the story doesn’t have to end there. Reconciliation is possible.

Reconciliation is a word that has been much bandied about in the last few years. In 1995, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up in South Africa. Apartheid was over. Nelson Mandela who had been imprisoned for 27 years on desolate Robyn's Island was not only free, but also President of the nation. And yet relationships amongst South Africans were a long way from being healed. This Commission allowed victims of gross human rights violations to make statements, and listeners to become aware of the atrocities committed under apartheid. In Canada, we've had our own Truth and Reconciliation Commission to enable survivors of Indian Residential Schools to speak about their experiences and start a process of reconciliation between aboriginal and non-aboriginal Canadians.

Reconciliation is possible not only on a national level, but also on a personal. Jesus sketches out a path to reconciliation. The first step is to be taken by the one who committed the wrong. That sounds reasonable, but what about the times we are blissfully unaware that we have hurt anyone? For a few years, I met regularly with a young man I'll call Charles who was on ODSP and living in a rooming house. Charles was usually angry. Angry with good reason because his disability cheque wouldn't stretch far enough for even a treat at Tim Horton's; angry because the security guard had him barred from the mall where he liked to hang out. Charles was also angry over perceived slights: "wouldn't you have thought the receptionist would greet me by name"; "wouldn't you have thought the doctor would spend more time with me." "Wouldn't you have thought..." Charles' list went on and on. As I listened, I couldn't help but think the

receptionist, the doctor and all the others probably have no idea they had wronged Charles. Anymore than I did with my brother's wife. In all innocence, I had sent her what I thought was a lovely birthday greeting. I got a blistering email back, complaining about how my family had never treated her well; we had never given her a real Butler birthday celebration. I was puzzled - what is a real Butler birthday celebration - and stunned. I had never wished her ill or set out to hurt her.

Once we are aware that a neighbour has something against us, we are to take responsibility and go to that neighbour. We are to risk putting ourselves out there; becoming vulnerable, not knowing how the other person may respond. That's scary. Truth be told, the last time I tried this with my sister-in-law, she dropped an email bomb which ended with: "don't bother to answer." She has cut herself off from my family, but that does not mean I can cut myself off from her. The high bar Jesus has set for our human relationships remains in place. God created us to live in community. I am a beloved child of God, and so is my sister-in-law. I cannot change her - how she feels or how she chooses to communicate with me - but I can refuse to follow my instincts to withdraw into silence. I can keep reaching out. Will it lead someday to reconciliation? I don't know. But if I don't try to walk this path, there's no hope.

Reconciliation is possible. I was attending the annual conference for spiritual directors. After all the sitting and listening to talks, it felt good to be up and moving, to be dancing in a sacred circle. The leader gave us instructions: when it comes time to join hands, have your right palm up and your left palm

down to avoid any awkwardness. I had no problem linking with the person on my left, but the one on the right just couldn't seem to get the hang of it. I reached out and flipped her hand. She exploded. I realized I had been wrong to correct her, but she just kept on ranting. She went up one side of me and down the other. Tail between my legs, I slunk out of the circle. I was intending to avoid her for the rest of the conference, but she sought me out. She shared her story: as a black kid, growing up poor, she had dreamed of being a ballerina. Somehow, her parents managed to get her into ballet lessons. She was thrilled, but her teacher - a white, middle class woman - was constantly correcting her and moving her limbs into the proper positions. She soon dropped out. When I flipped her hand, I was that teacher, and all her anger came pouring out. "Forgive me", we both said, and our arms opened to embrace.

Jesus sets the bar high - far higher than we might choose - insisting that steps be taken towards reconciliation. Thanks be to God who gives us the courage to take responsibility for our actions and reach out to the one we have wronged. Thanks be to God who binds us all in bonds of love. Amen.