

“The Dance of Reconciliation (Without Stepping on Toes)”

Matthew 18:15–20

Julie R. Harley – September 4, 2011 – First United Church of Oak Park

My parents were wonderful ballroom dancers. They actually met at a USO dance, when my father was in the Air Force and my mother was an elementary teacher near the military base in Rantoul, Illinois. When I was growing up, they would go out dancing at least once a month with other couples at the Col Ballroom.

I'll never forget the first time I danced with my father, when I was about 19 years old. After we got off the dance floor, he said, “Well, that was like trying to dance with a cat in a paper bag.”

I'm afraid he was right. The problem is: I never had any lessons. I did take some disco classes in 1978, and I can still do the bump or the electric slide like a pro. But no one ever taught me how to dance with a partner.

I'm not the only one with this handicap. Just look at President Barack Obama and Speaker of the House John Boehner. It looks like they can't agree about who's going to lead. Lots of toes are being stepped on, and we all wish our leaders would take a few lessons about how to dance together for the sake of the country.

To be honest, we've got the same problem in the church. We come together to worship, to serve, to teach, to reach out in mission, and to do the work of the church, and we all want to be in the lead. We want to choose the music and do the dance that we know best. And then we discover that life in the church can feel like dancing with a cat in a paper bag.

This happens because we are products of our culture. We come together with minds shaped by the Enlightenment philosophy of John Locke, believing that we are a voluntary association of autonomous individuals. If we don't like something, we can just check out. We are tempted to dance alone. “Don't tread on me,” that quintessentially American motto, has its benefits, but can be a huge obstacle when we try to live together in community as disciples of Jesus Christ.

I love the story of a pastor and his family who were driving home from church one day. The sermon was about the need for world peace, and the grownups in the car were discussing it. Meanwhile, in the backseat the children were punching each other, pulling each other's hair, calling each other names and bursting into tears. One of the adults pointed to the brawl going on in the back of the car and said, "You want to know why we don't have world peace? There is the answer."

Division is always easier than reconciliation. We don't want to feel awkward and we don't want to step on toes, and we have never taken lessons in healthy conflict resolution. What I observe over and over again in myself, in other people and in the life of the church is that we tend to respond to conflict in one of three **unhealthy** ways:

1. **We pretend nothing is wrong.** Just don't talk about the problem. Keep it to yourself, because harmony, even the **illusion of harmony** is the most important thing. We do not speak the truth when there is a conflict, believing somehow it will magically disappear. It usually doesn't.
2. **We use the silent treatment.** If we are mad at someone, we just stop talking to them. We don't answer their phone calls or emails; we don't speak to them; we act like they don't exist.

In C. S. Lewis' book *The Great Divorce*, he paints a picture of hell. Hell is like a huge, gray city where people live only in houses on the outer edges of town. There are rows and rows of empty homes in the middle of the city of hell. They are empty because everyone who lived there has had a fight with their neighbors and moved away. Then they quarreled with their new neighbors and moved away again, leaving empty streets full of empty houses behind them. Hell has gotten pretty large because everyone in it chooses distance rather than confrontation as the solution to a fight.

3. **We take revenge, by engaging in a private smear campaign.** Rather than confronting the person directly, we talk with everyone else we know and take the opportunity to question the other person's character or say something demeaning. It doesn't resolve the problem, but it does allow us to vent. When we're particularly evil, we build alliances against our enemies with other like-minded individuals.

Most of us have learned these unhealthy ways of responding to conflict from our families. Some are modeled for us by politicians and celebrities.

Some have learned them in church. I recently heard a story about a congregation that had a violent disagreement among its leaders. The argument got so bad that everyone in the room stood up and began shouting at one another, and eventually picked up the chairs around the meeting table and began to throw them across the room.

I think we can do better than that. Life in the church is much more as God intends it when we take a few lessons in the dance of reconciliation. We need to learn the steps together, and practice, practice, practice.

As Desmond Tutu said during the aftermath of the apartheid regime in South Africa, "There is no future without forgiveness." The church teaches us that people are not disposable, and we cannot simply walk off the dance floor. Instead, Christ calls us to a persistent, step-by-step process for resolving conflict.

Reconciliation begins when the person who has been sinned against takes the initiative to resolve the conflict. The first step is for that victim to go and speak to the person who wronged them. In some cases, this resolves the problem.

If the person doesn't listen, the next step is to bring two or three others to help seek forgiveness. Sometimes gentle confrontation resolves the issue.

The third step is to bring the problem before the whole church for resolution.

And if that doesn't work, Jesus tells us to release that person and let him or her be like a Gentile or tax collector to us. This doesn't mean they are shunned or excommunicated. It simply means that because of their refusal to take responsibility for the hurt that occurred, they have placed themselves at a distance from the community. Like Lewis' vision of hell, the offender has chosen to move to the outskirts of town. That doesn't mean we cut them off, it simply means that we will have to wait till they are ready to be folded back into the community again.

All of this takes courage and hard work. Many of us are afraid to do it.

I know, because I finally got brave enough to take ballroom dancing lessons this summer. I was incredibly nervous and not sure what to expect when I met with Tom, my instructor at the Fred Astaire Dance Studio.

I knew I didn't want to look awkward. I didn't want to step on Tom's toes. Dance involves a lot of physical trust and closeness, and I found myself kind of seizing up sometimes, not ready to let go of my normal autonomy.

Of course the whole room was floor-to-ceiling mirrors, and I was self-conscious about how I looked and what other people would think of me. I saw other people dancing really well and doubted my own abilities. It occurred to me that there are many good reasons why alcohol is usually served at places where people go dancing.

But over the course of several lessons – even without alcohol – I grew more confident. I trusted Tom to lead, and I knew that when I forgot the steps he would remind me without being too harsh about it. Eventually, I found the foxtrot, the waltz, the cha cha and the mambo were like new languages I had learned to speak.

One of the great principles in spiritual growth is this: We ACT our way into new ways of thinking. We don't THINK our way into new ways of acting.

The only way to learn the dance of reconciliation is to try it. Find a partner here at church to help you learn the steps. If you're nervous and feel awkward, ask two or three people to pray with you and support you in taking the first step.

As scary as this is, it helps to be clear in knowing that you are working to preserve a relationship, rather than end it. You are seeking reconciliation, not revenge. And it is less important to be right than to be in relationship.

Barbara Brown Taylor says: If this is not something you are eager to do, do not let that stop you; there is not a word in today's reading about **wanting** to reach out to your brother or sister.

In a lot of ways, it is a real nuisance to belong to a church or a family. It would be so much easier if we were just a bunch of individuals, loosely bound together by similar beliefs but whose affairs remained an essentially private matter between us and God.

But **our life together** is the chief means God has chosen for being with us, and it is of ultimate importance to God. **Our life together** is the place where we are comforted, confronted, tested and redeemed by God through one another. (The Seeds of Heaven, pg. 89)

Learning the dance of reconciliation is not easy. It's not always pretty. We may step on a few toes. We feel awkward as we give up old, unhealthy patterns and learn new ways of moving together.

But the more we practice confession, forgiveness and reconciliation, the more we will enter into true communion with God and our neighbors.

One couple described their marriage by saying, "It is like we have a rubber band around us. We can run from each other only so far before the rubber band begins to pull us back." (John Shea, On Earth As It Is In Heaven , pg. 271). The rituals of the church are designed to be the rubber band that holds us together. All we have to do is sense the pull and surrender to the pressure . . . and let Christ lead us.

Let's dance! We've just had our first lesson from a teacher who is truly divine. Amen.