

Praying through Conflict

‘Conflict opens a path,
a holy path,
towards revelation and reconciliation’
~ John Paul Lederach, Reconcile:

conflict transformation for ordinary Christians ~

In the midst of conflict, when we can feel caught up in despair, confusion and deep separation, we may, with the psalmists, turn to prayers of anguish and lament.

Working and living through conflict can be tough. At the same time, in Place for Hope we affirm, with Lederach, that conflict can open up a path, a holy path towards inner and outer transformation. When conflict is transformed and relationships are healed, we may also offer prayers of thanks, gratitude and joy.

In prayer we turn humbly towards God; we ask for help; and we remain open to a response. When we find ourselves in a broken relationship, a divided community, a church at loggerheads, or overwhelmed by the violence in the world, the same three-fold prayer dynamic persists: turn to God, seek help, and remain open to the surprise of the Holy Spirit.

In prayer, turn to God

In turning to God in times of conflict we immediately acknowledge that we are not alone. No matter how wise we are as human beings, in prayer we acknowledge a deeper, wider mystery and faith. The very act of turning to God can itself be the start of a process of reconciliation: in turning, we turn inwards to the wisdom of God. This inner turning is also an invitation to consider, in humility, the part we ourselves may be

playing in the conflict. In turning to God, we also turn outwards, opening ourselves to the possibility that new ways may be found to respond to conflict, difference and change – both in ourselves and in the other. Turning outwards, we may find ourselves turning to face the other – perhaps the one opposed – and so find ourselves on the path to transformation.

In turning to God we pray: ‘In You, O Lord, I put my trust.’ And so we discover anew the wisdom of the Lord’s prayer: ‘Your kingdom come, Your will be done.’ In turning humbly to God we begin by asking: ‘What is Your will, dear God?’

In prayer, ask for help

The Psalms tell many stories of enemies, hatred, revenge killing and the abuse of power. These are stories with echoes for today. Yet Scripture, and the Psalms also reveal to us the persistence and faith of God’s people who, in times of awful trouble, continue to turn to God in prayer for help. Psalm 46 sets the tone: ‘God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.’ This ever-present God is affirmed again in Matthew 18, when, in a chapter full of conflict, we read ‘where two or three are gathered in My name, I am there among them’, or in other words, ‘when you are in trouble, and you ask for My help, know that I am already there among you.’ Events may not turn out as we wish, or expect – but we can be sure that when we ask for help in prayer, we, all of us seeking transformation, will receive it. We are not alone.

In prayer, remain open to the surprise of the Holy Spirit

Isaac and Rebekah, when their prayers for a child were answered, may have been surprised not only by the

miracle of life, or by the awful conflict between their boys: they may have been equally surprised by the eventual reconciliation experienced. Jacob and Esau may have been destined to become sworn enemies but the story of their reconciliation gives us hope: the experience of humiliation by the other, of running away from our enemy, and then with God's help of finding the strength to turn towards and to greet the enemy are all present in this story (Genesis 25ff.). As we remain open to the surprise of the Holy Spirit in prayer, we may discover that what seems to be an intractable and unbearable conflict carries with it deeper truths that can transform our lives and the lives of those around us.

In times of conflict ...

In times of conflict it can be helpful to:

I take time to be still

I turn to God in openness and humility

I seek the help of God, and of others around you to understand the differences that face you

I be prepared to be surprised by the gift of the Holy Spirit

I trust that conflict can 'open up a holy path' to transformation.

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