

Exodus 12:1-14
Psalm 149

Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

A little over three years ago we were introduced to Nebraska's new brand: Nebraska Nice. The Nebraska Tourism Commission says it found the essence of the state: Nice. Their marketing and promotional campaign will be "Visit Nebraska, Visit nice." Nebraska Nice is going to be a registered trademark. The slogan that so many of us remember is "Nebraska...the good life" which goes back to the 1970s.

As one marketing professor at Creighton University said, "We're not trying to be something we're not, or something others won't believe we are." Midwesterners are known for being nice. We read letters to the editor from people who came to Memorial Stadium to watch their team play Nebraska. The letters thank Nebraskans for being nice to them, to their opponents. We don't treat people that way. Nebraska Nice.

However, being nice also has its down side. Because we are nice, we hesitate to speak to others about any kind of relational conflict. We are nice and refuse to speak to them. We are uncomfortable about saying anything about concerns we have with someone else. We are Midwesterners, we are Nebraskans, and this is church, so we have to be nice to one another. One church needed to fire their elderly longtime organist. She could be very intimidating. Do you know the difference between a terrorist and a church musician? You can negotiate with a terrorist! That's just a joke! Anyway, this church was trying to be nice to this elderly organist. They just could not fire her. So, they threw a retirement party for her. That did not work. She kept on playing. So do you know that they did next? They sold the organ! I kid you not! Churches can be places where people are too nice and we do not want to talk to them about any Conflict.

Churches can be places of the most indirect, passive places in the world, because we

think we need to be nice, and to be nice means not revealing any conflicts we may have. Being nice has prevented many churches from resolving any conflict, which can limit, even destroy the mission and ministry of that church. There is another way that is better than giving retirement parties or selling the organ! Jesus gives us some practical advice as to what we are to do.

Most of the time Jesus speaks in nebulous parables that invite reflection and prognostication. But occasionally in the Gospels, he is remarkably practical and direct. Such practical advice may be much easier to understand, but he does not give us much wiggle room in terms of interpretation. Jesus takes it for granted that there will be “in-sinners” against one another in the church, as one pastor calls it. But something as important to relational hurt within the church cannot be left to chance. It is nice for us to deal with relational conflict in the church for it helps mission to get done. Nice should not mean we don’t talk to others about conflict. Rather, nice refers to how we approach people. We do it as we read in the Scriptures, “Making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” Or, from our Romans passage last week, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” We approach others in a sense of gentleness. We need to be careful that when we do speak, we are not attaching God’s stamp of approval on our self-righteousness.

The first action in Jesus’ instruction is to go. In other words, don’t be passive aggressive like the church was with the organist. Speak, and speak to them. Don’t belly ache to others. Don’t triangle other people into the conflict. Go and speak honestly to the person. Earlier in Matthew Jesus provided other advice about conflict resolution: “When you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister

has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister.” If you remember that you have wronged someone, go. In today’s passage, Jesus says that if someone has wronged you, go to be reconciled to them. In other words, if someone has offended you, or if you have offended someone, go and be reconciled. Whether you’re the one who’s been wronged, or the one who’s done the wrong, it is still your responsibility to swallow your pride, get up and go to your sister or brother, seeking to be reconciled. There is none of this, “Why should I make the first move? It wasn’t my fault. It’s the other person who’s got to reach out!” That is how feuds get started. Both sides are absolutely convinced it’s the other person’s fault. They’re not going to budge. This can go on for years—generations even. Sometimes conflict in the church can be a Hatfields and McCoys type, going on for years. Whether you were the one wronged, or you were the one who wronged the other, go.

We are to go and speak to that person in private. If that does not work, we are to take one or two others, and again speak to that person. Then if still there is no resolution, we are to tell it to the church, and the church is to work together to seek reconciliation. I think most of us understand this process. So I want to go on to the next instruction: “If the member refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” As Jill Duffield asks, “What do we do with this God-father like ‘You’re dead to me part of this text?’” There may very well be that part of us that says, “Good riddance, and thanks be to God!”

Not so fast. You may recall that the Pharisees, the religious leaders of Jesus’ day, criticized Jesus for eating with the Gentiles and the tax collectors. Remember what

Jesus said to them, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’” That provides us with a lens through which we can understand this passage. Jesus’ response to the Pharisees means that we have more concern and responsibility for them rather than less. As Jill Duffield suggests, “It certainly would be revolutionary, impactful in this real and the next, if even Gentiles and tax collectors were brought into the fold.” That is the goal of conflict resolution, that all may be in the fold.

In a statement written by sixteen theologians, the “Princeton Proposal for Christian Unity,” reads, “A common life, in which those who were divided are reconciled in the body of Christ, is an essential goal of the mission that God has appointed for his people. Unity is not merely a means to mission, but rather a constituent goal: God gathers his people precisely in order to bring unity to a divided humanity.” I don’t think I need to mention the fact that we live in divided times. There is so much division in our nation and the world. Should not the church be a reconciled body, not only because that is what God wants, but so that the church can model that for our nation and for the world?

At the name of Jesus
every knee will bend
and every tongue confess
that Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God. Amen.