

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Cycle A-2026

In the movie, “The Story of Us,” Michelle Pfeiffer and Bruce Willis play the role of a married couple named Katie and Ben Gordon. During their 15 years together, their love had grown cold, and they fell into an endless pattern of arguing and yelling at each other. They were headed down the path of divorce. In the end, Katie had the epiphany that in spite of it all, they had a real “history together.” A history that was worth fighting for, saving, and building on. Even with all their differences, she realized they had truly blessed and enriched each other’s lives in so many ways. On top of that, they knew and understood one another better than anyone else in the world. Ben agreed with her assessment, and they made the decision to keep building on that history.

The “Story of Us” got me thinking about how one of the most important life skills is conflict resolution. I would also contend that it is an important Christian virtue. The unfortunate thing is many of us have never been taught them and it usually doesn’t come natural for most people. Our default setting is to yell, argue, attack,

accuse, belittle, or deny, just like Katie and Ben did. The opposite may also be true. Some people simply “ice” each out through a process of emotional and physical distancing.

The world is in dire need of “civil discourse” in working through personal conflicts. In our Gospel reading, Jesus lays out a simple but challenging vision for doing so. The first step is to talk directly to the person. What a novel idea! Why didn’t we think of that? The natural tendency is for us to stew over it in our hearts and complain to other people. We often do this without getting around to talking to the other person and trying to work things out. It is understandable, since doing so can be quite intimidating. There is always the possibility that the situation could escalate or the attempts at reconciliation could fail.

Even though there is no guarantee it will work, the way we deal with the other person makes all the difference. It will be more effective if we approach them with an attitude of respect and self-control. It is also good to take ownership of our own thoughts and feelings.

Instead of attacking them with a litany of accusations and grievances, we calmly share that when they “said this” or “did that,” or failed to “say this” or “do that,” this is how

I interpreted it and this is how it personally affected me. It is also good to give the other person the opportunity to share their side of the story. This will provide us insight into what they were thinking, feeling, or what they truly intended. We may discover that they were unaware of the harm they inflicted, did not mean to come across the way they did, or are profoundly sorry for the hurt they unintentionally or intentionally caused.

With this calm and level-headed approach, genuine dialogue and full reconciliation becomes possible. The most important thing is to interact with them in a manner where we try not to set off their defense mechanisms. It tends to be a lost cause after that. It is also important to keep our composure if they get defensive despite our most diplomatic efforts. This approach provides the highest likelihood of success. Regardless of how it goes, it is still the most mature and Christian way of approaching conflict resolution.

Following the insights of Jesus in the Gospel, if step one is a failure, it may be time to move to step two. This involves getting another person involved to help facilitate reconciliation. It is essential that whoever that person is, they are blessed with the gift of objectivity. In other words, they do not take sides but try to facilitate

communication that helps both parties open up in a constructive manner. As the conversation unfolds, there is an increased hope that everyone can see the situation from a bigger and broader perspective. Each party begins to better understand the other person's point of view. They may even be convicted about how they are the source of the problem or how they have contributed to it. Like Katie Gordon, each person begins to see past and present goodness in their relationship and the other person. This "history together" makes it worth fighting for and putting in the hard work of change and acceptance.

Family members and friends often tend to be too subjective. They struggle with taking sides or creating an "us" versus "them" dynamic. If we have a loved one who has the capacity to remain objective, and they are willing to get involved, they are worth their weight in gold. Often times, step two involves going to someone outside the family. Someone like a trusted and wise person or group of people, a member of the clergy, a lay spiritual director, or a professional counselor. There is no shame in doing so as many people struggle to successfully navigate relational conflict by themselves.

The important thing is that as Christians, we seek to develop the virtue of forgiveness and a willingness to resolve personal conflict. When it comes to relational dynamics, we would do well to keep in mind these following words of wisdom from Robin Williams in his role as Chris Nielson in the movie “What Dreams May Come”: “Sometimes when you win, you lose, and sometimes when you lose, you win.” Conflict resolution is hard and messy work. It demands that we set aside our ego and pride. It often requires that we lose the need to always be right and win or to wallow in the pain of the transgression. We do this so that we can win through a renewed and restored relationship.

In many ways, it is so much easier to ignore the problem, not deal with it, accept the underlying tension, or walk away from the relationship. Yet on a conscious and unconscious level, it drains our life energy. It does so by weighing heavy on our hearts. Our hearts begin to bleed and hemorrhage with sadness, anger, bitterness, anxiety, or a sense of hopelessness. This is especially true if we have to interact with this person every day and there is little or no refuge from their presence or the dynamics of the relationship.

In the Gospels, Jesus calls us to choose and follow the “narrow way.” He doesn’t promise us that it is easy, but it is the path to a greater abundance of life now and for all eternity. Jesus wants us to follow the narrow way of embracing forgiveness and a willingness to work through our personal conflicts, in a healthy and holy manner. This narrow way requires a lot of humility, self-control, self-reflection, and openness of spirit. Most of all, it requires a lot of love for God and the other person.

Too often as Christians, our approach to conflict totally mirrors that of the secular world. That is not something to be proud of or to brag about, by the way. It is time for us to change this narrative and begin to deal with conflict resolution from a perspective of faith, hope, and love. How we handle conflict resolution can strengthen or weaken our relationship with God. Depending on the circumstances or the severity of the dynamic, it has the potential to confirm or jeopardize our eternal salvation.

We are called to approach it with the awareness that Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, is fully present to both parties, desiring to bring healing and wholeness into our lives and relationship. We also have the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit at our disposal. Whether it be a spouse, significant other, family member, friend, or

treasured acquaintance, like Katie and Ben Gordon, we can come to a renewed love and appreciation for one another, when all hope seemed lost. He helps us continue a story or history together that we had long considered permanently altered or ended. For nothing is impossible with God!