

## Straight to Headquarters

*Preached by the Rev. Thomas M. Kryder-Reid on the Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, 4 September 2011, at Trinity Episcopal Church, Indianapolis. Scripture readings: Exodus 12:1-14, Psalm 149, Romans 13:8-14, Matthew 18:15-20.*

I've been curious this week about the origins of Labor Day. I wasn't surprised to learn that this holiday we observe every year on this weekend grew out of the labor movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nobody's sure who first came up with the idea for it. I can tell you that the guy's last name was either McGuire or, possibly, Maguire—different spelling, no relation. Peter McGuire was a carpenter from New York and later St. Louis; Matthew Maguire was a machinist from New Jersey. Both were labor movement leaders.

Whoever gets the credit, here's what, for me, stands out from the history—two realizations.

First, McGuire and Maguire and their hosts of comrades had good cause for raising public awareness and demanding change. A few factoids for you, courtesy of History.com: "In the late 1800s, at the height of the Industrial Revolution in the United States, the average American worked 12-hour days and seven-day weeks... children as young as 5 or 6 toiled in mills, factories and mines... [And] people of all ages... faced... unsafe working conditions..." If you've ever read Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle*, you get the picture.

Second, those reverent as well as irreverent activists back then weren't shy about letting their grievances be known. When management wouldn't listen, they organized, made speeches, and went on strike; they boycotted, paraded,\* and sometimes rioted.

Now notice I said, "When management wouldn't listen..." The more responsible among the more reverent of those early activists did what my grandmother used to do whenever she had a bone to pick with anybody or any business: "I'll go straight to headquarters!" she'd declare. And, mind you, she would "Go straight to headquarters!"—and not by any secondary or circuitous means, but *in person*.

### I

So I've been wondering: My blessed grandmother, and likely the more reverent of those 1880s activists, may well have been familiar with certain instructions we heard a few minutes ago from Jesus himself:

If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

I can tell you from twenty-five years as a parish priest and more than double those years as a member of this crazy species we call the human race: Truer, more practical words have never

been spoken. Jesus' advice here is bulls-eye on target—for the health and vitality of church people, yes; and, I dare say, for the health and vitality of all people.

Let me restate what he's saying—I'll generalize it now. If you have a conflict with somebody, or you think somebody has a conflict with you, here's what you do. As basic as one, two, three:

- One: Go to that person directly. Straight to *headquarters*. Try to work out the problem in person, in private, face to face.
- Two: If in person, in private, face to face with the two of you doesn't work, then bring in others—a few trustworthy others. But again, try to work out the problem face to face, with all involved hearing the same story in the same place.
- Three: If in person, in private, face to face with others doesn't work, then go public. Organize, make speeches, strike, boycott, parade—but please, don't riot. Do what you need to do—in community—to work out what's best for all.

Finally, if neither Step One nor Two nor Three does the job... well then, to borrow a piece of advice Jesus offers elsewhere, “shake off the dust from your feet” and move on [Mt. 10:14].

Or as he puts it here, treat 'em like Gentiles and tax collectors.

Which, actually, is not as harsh as it sounds. What he means is: Keep avenues open. Keep hope alive. Keep your eyes peeled—for even the teeniest slivers of opportunities to reconcile. Jesus throughout his earthly ministry had a keen eye for any opportunities to break down barriers and bring healing. Including for outsiders and Gentiles like the Samaritan woman at the well [Jn. 4:1-42] and the Centurion with the sick servant [Mt. 8:5-13]. And even for traitorous tax collectors like Zaccheus [Lk. 19:1-10] and Matthew [Mt. 10:3] the gospel writer. All of whom, in time, came to him.

Keep avenues open, hope alive, and your eyes peeled for opportunities to reconcile, he's saying. Those are the *dos*.

Now, some *don'ts*: bright yellow caution lights—red lights. These warnings flash for me out of what Jesus is saying here and also out of way too much personal and priestly experience of conflict managed badly.

- First: Don't complain about somebody to others, and don't let others complain about somebody to you. Going to third parties first is called triangling [Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue*, Guilford 1985, pp. 35-39]. And triangling always steps up and spreads anxiety, never calms it. Jesus and my grandmother were right: Go straight to *headquarters*.
- Second: Don't use email to try to resolve conflict. Don't text. If you must use such media, use them only to arrange time and place to meet in person, face to face, for which there is no substitute. I can't tell you how much conflict I've seen escalated, exacerbated, extenuated—including and especially in church—when people fire off angry emails and texts. Emailing and texting just offer too much temptation to blast away, hit *send*, and avoid the in-person, face-to-face.
- Third: Don't send anonymous letters—ever. Anonymous letters are cowardice in print: No accountability in the sender. No opportunity for response by the receiver. No possibility of reconciliation for anybody. Anonymous letters just offer too much temptation to blast away, stamp on the stamp, and avoid the in-person, face-to-face.

Triangling, emailing or texting, sending anonymous letters—but tactics like those feel *so good*, don't they?

Or do they?

A playful writer by the name of Frederick Buechner has thoughts about how good tactics like those feel—in the long run. His book *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC* [Harper Collins 1973, revised 1993] includes the following analysis of anger:

Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you. [p. 2]

## II

**O**ne last reflection for now: Did you notice, in today's gospel, that Jesus repeatedly makes reference to “the church”? And yet, “the church” as it came into being through the disciples after his resurrection—not to mention “the church” as we know it today—did not yet exist when he spoke with the disciples here. Curious, isn't it?

So, in all likelihood, this passage must be the product of those disciples and their descendents reflecting back on Jesus' teaching, reframing his words into terms that could speak to “the church” from age to age. Besides, they no doubt came to appreciate Jesus' oft-repeated warning that, as church people, we'd better be careful not to let ourselves get all sanctimonious thinking we're somehow conflict-immune. Or even that we'll ever—this side of heaven—have the hard, messy, risky work of resolving conflict neatly figured out. For as a friend of mine so aptly observes—there's no fight like a church fight.

On that note, I'll leave you with my all-time favorite church-fight story to reflect on yourself this Labor Day weekend. Talk about labor-management relations... I wonder what the likes of McGuire and Maguire would have thought about this reverent activist.

His name is Elias Chacour. He's now Archbishop of the largest Christian community in the Holy Land, the Melkite Catholic Church. But people still call him Abuna—meaning, affectionately, “Father.”

When this humble Palestinian priest began his ordained ministry back in the 1960s, he was assigned to a congregation in a seething little village. Divisions and hatreds there had been festering for generations, and when Abuna Chacour arrived, he was confounded. He visited people daily, drew them back to church—but wrung his hands trying to figure out how to reconcile them. They clung to their old resentments with a death grip.

Finally, on Palm Sunday, with the church packed, he took action. The service was almost over. The people had heard the story of Jesus' death on the cross. They'd shared blessed bread and wine at the altar. Abuna marched down the aisle all the way to the door of the church. He paused momentarily—there was a clicking sound—and then he turned around and said this to all present:

This morning while I celebrated the liturgy, I found someone who is able to help you. In fact, he is the only one who can work the miracle of reconciliation in this village. This person... is Jesus Christ, and he is here with us.... So on Christ's behalf, I say this to you:

The doors of the church are locked. Either you kill each other right here in your hatred and then I will celebrate your funerals gratis, or you use this opportunity to be reconciled together... That decision is now yours.

For ten minutes, nothing happened. Dead silence. Nobody moved. Then one of the villagers, a policeman in uniform, slowly rose to his feet. He faced the congregation. He said,

I ask forgiveness of everybody here and I forgive everybody [here]. And I ask God to forgive me my sins.

People started talking (nervously at first)—then hugging one another, then weeping, laughing at their idiocy. They violated all liturgical propriety and decided to celebrate Easter a week early. Abuna unlocked the church doors, and people streamed out into the village singing hymns of resurrection [Elias Chacour, *We Belong to the Land*, Harper Collins, 1990, Ch 4].

\* The first Labor Day parade, as it were, took place twelve years before Congress formally authorized the national holiday. On September 5<sup>th</sup>, 1882, ten-thousand workers in New York City took unpaid time off and marched *en masse* from City Hall to Union Square.

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