

Several years ago in the Kansas City Star, there was an article entitled: "A time to leave and a time to stay."

It was an article concerned with the issue of when someone should break their ties with a particular church or congregation and join another – and when they should just stay put.

Of course I read it with interest. . . Listed among the reasons as to why people in the pews leave a particular church and go to another – was:-

- turmoil among the members of the congregation.
- difficulty with the pastor.
- disagreement over theology.
- feelings of being treated unfairly.
- and feeling like one's spiritual gifts were not being appreciated.

The bottom line of the article was that there IS a time to leave, but there IS also a time to stay. But the decision is one that needs to be well thought out – and comes only after some time and effort has been invested in trying to settle conflict and seek reconciliation --- either with others, with the pastor, or with the differing theological view.

Richard Olson, one of the pastors quoted in the article stated:

"When conflicts arise in a congregation: IF we are loyal to God who is revealed in Christ – we should be able to handle a lot of differences. IF we all love Christ, a lot of things should be minor points." The important question to consider, Olson said, is "what are the basic things we gather around and affirm that will help us to handle the difference."

Handling conflict, differences, and divisions are the focus of Jesus' words in the Gospel today. Notice Jesus' focus, though, is on individuals, rather than on groups – which is where we most likely encounter conflict in our lives.

As I tell many couples in marriage preparation classes: having problems is not the problem – as everyone has them. BUT NOT BEING ABLE TO TALK ABOUT THE PROBLEMS, so as to work through them – IS the problem, and that's why we need good conflict resolution skills.

BUT, who/ ever teaches us how to handle conflict? It usually isn't something that we are taught in school, or which comes naturally to us – like breathing or walking. . .

So we usually handle conflict in the way it was modeled to us growing up in our families --- which may not be the best way, but the only way we know.

And that's why Jesus' words and his method are so important – because in the family of God, we do things just a bit different.

What Jesus tells us is the first step in conflict resolution – seems so evident, but is so hard to do – that if we are having difficulty with someone – we need to go to that person and tell them about the difficulty!

Now I think a lot of us have turmoil in our lives – because we can't get to first base in the reconciliation process. How many of us, instead of telling someone how they have hurt us – will just give them the silent treatment – will yell and scream and kick the dog – will pound on something with our fist – growl at others – or simply try to avoid the person at all costs?

A simple question: How is someone supposed to know that they have hurt us – by their words or actions – if we never tell them??

It's one of those things we take for granted – guessing they are just supposed to get it through osmosis – that they are just supposed to know they have done something totally stupid or unacceptable.

Or instead of talking with the person we are having difficulty with – how many of us will jump to step 2 of Jesus' method – which is amassing the support of our friends – before we even attempt step 1??

We will talk to EVERYONE ELSE – tell everyone else how we have been wronged – except for the person who caused the wrong.

Another way of saying this is that we will Gossip about the person and the situation – but do nothing to resolve the issue.

Apart from never being taught how to handle conflict – why do we find it soooooo difficult to deal with conflict??

I think it's because we are afraid – we've been hurt and we don't want to risk further hurt.

We would rather hold on to the pain and hurt than exchange it for something more life-giving --- because we are familiar with pain and hurt – and we're not always sure about the unknown – that which lies on the other side of attempted reconciliation.

As Fr. James Martin reminded us on the weekend of Jesus' calming of the storm--- it may not be the storms in our lives we fear ---- as much as the calm after the storms. . .

There was a man who was thinking about divorcing his wife. So he went to a lawyer to talk about his marital problems, and after telling his side of the story – he asked, "What is the best thing I can do?"

The lawyer replied, "Well, I think the best thing you can do – is go back to your wife, apologize – and make this marriage work."

The man was silent for a while and then replied, "well, what's the next best thing I can do?"

How many times do we settle for the next best thing we can do – instead of the best thing? And we usually settle on the next best thing – because we are afraid of attempting the best thing. . .

This stuff of conflict and reconciliation is important – and so critical to our lives. Because if we never learn to resolve conflicts and deal with differences – then the same things keeping haunting our relationships. . .

As Pastor Olson said in the Star article: "if a person does think he or she needs to leave a congregation – it should be done in a loving and healing way. So many people leave hurt and angry --- and that will show up in their next church involvement."

As with congregations – so, also, with individuals. If we walk away hurt and angry – chances are those emotions are going to pop up in our next relationship.

I know I have just scraped the surface on these issues – and luckily, or providentially – Jesus gives us another story of conflict and reconciliation in next Sunday's gospel. So this --- will be continued.

In the meantime, let's at least practice Jesus' first step in reconciliation – or at least think about it or pray about it ---- if we are having difficulty with someone else – go and tell them their fault between you and them alone. If they listen, then we have won over our brother or sister.

Because even when all else fails – we are supposed to treat them as a Gentile or tax collector – which in the family of God –means we pray for them, love them, and desire nothing but the best for them.