

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany
February 13, 2011

The Rev. Canon Neysa Ellgren

Thank you Bill and Nathan for inviting me here to preach today. Of course, after just hearing that gospel reading, I understand why you wanted me to come in and preach for you! What a passage! As some of you know I am Neysa Ellgren and I am the new Bishop's Canon for Congregational Development and Staff. I've been here since December and have enjoyed attending many services here at Trinity already.

My job with Bishop Michael is to work with congregations that are in transition with priest changes. I work with deployment of priests in the diocese. I also work with the Commission on Ministry O and B working with people who are in discernment to figure out what ministries God is calling them to next.

As you know, all of us are called to serve God, some to be deacons and priests, but most for specialized ministries of many different kinds. And it helps so much to meet with a group of people from the church to help figure all that out. I can see by the various and wonderful ministries you offer here that many of you know what I am talking about. The other things I do are to help the Bishop with his staff and with pastoral care of priests and to help plan the convention and clergy conferences. Maybe you can tell by my accent that I grew up in small town Minnesota. Ya sure, you bettcha! I have four sons ages 17 to 25 who are scattered for work and school in Minnesota and Colorado and I am so happy to be here now on Oregon with my youngest son Nathan.

There is an old story from Minnesota that I want to share with you about a farming town where everyone seemed to be fighting with everyone else - petty squabbles, pitting neighbor against neighbor. Finally the town council had had it. They gathered a bunch of the people together and then they went and consulted a wise priest to see if they could find answers to this problem. The priest listened to them and then agreed to think on the matter and to send the town a letter soon to tell them in detail what they could do to resolve it.

A few days later, the priest sat down and wrote his letter to the people,

full of advice on how to make peace in their town.

He also sat down and wrote a letter to a farmer friend of his who was having trouble with a bull. Then the priest folded the letters, put them in envelopes and sent them off. Well, you can guess what happened. The priest accidentally mixed up the letters.

The message for the town got sent to the farmer friend.

The message for the farmer friend got sent to the town council.

Here is the message that the townspeople received:

“You had better see that your fences are put up well in the first place. Plough your ground deep and sort your seed. Be careful not to sow foul seed, and take care of that great, ugly bull. I think you had better poke him. The rest I will tell you when I come.”

Well, the townspeople sat in silence for a long time, contemplating the priest’s strange message.

Finally one woman stood up and attempted to interpret it.

The putting up of fences, she said must refer to the rules of common courtesy and respect. The people had been neglecting these rules for too long. And plowing the ground must be another way of saying the people need to open their hearts, to allow the good seeds of love and tolerance to be sown. The warning against foul seed was obvious: the citizens had an obligation to stop gossip and mean-spirited talk, and to sort the truth from the untruth. And the great ugly bull could only symbolize one thing, an evil spirit that had come into their midst and stirred up so much strife among them.

Well, the people were so moved by the priest’s advice that they immediately began to talk kindly to each other, to offer forgiveness and to ask for forgiveness from one another. They opened up their hearts to each other and in a short time peace came to the once feuding town.

I wish other feuds could be settled that quickly don’t you?

Like the feuds in countries like Egypt and the Sudan and right here the feuds between political parties and families and neighbors.

Actually, Jesus gave us a formula for solving some of the interpersonal problems that come between us in his Sermon on the Mount – a difficult part of which we heard read in the gospel today.

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times,

‘You shall not murder,’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’

But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister you will be liable to the council..."

I think first of all, Jesus is saying, take care of your inner life and then your outer actions will take care of themselves.

You've heard stories about guys beating each other up in parking lots because each one wanted the same parking space or people fighting on the sides of highways because one merged their car in front of the other. The point isn't that that one had the right of way over the other.

The point is that they were both carrying around such anger that it was just ready to explode at whatever situation might happen.

Morgan, age 11, offers this advice on spotting and dealing with anger:

"When your mom is mad at your dad, don't let her brush your hair."

And Leslie, also 11, says, "When your mother is mad and asks you, 'Do I look stupid?' it's best not to answer her."

Children become quite adept at spotting the signs of anger because so often they are the unsuspecting target of adult anger.

Martin Luther King admonished people to 'avoid not only violence of deed, but violence of spirit.' That is great advice for us today.

If we will take care of our inner turmoil, be it anger, or lust or envy or greed, if we work through our inner turmoil, then our outer actions will very likely take care of themselves.

And we have help to do that inner work right here.

Through talking things out with close church friends, through prayer, through meditation, through discernment, counseling, and spiritual direction, we have many good ways we can understand and work through our inner emotions and come to peace within.

Then I think the second part of the formula Jesus gives us for interpersonal relationships today is to "nip problems in the bud."

Do not let problems get out of hand. Don't let them fester.

Deal with them as soon as possible. A wise spiritual mentor once told me, "Always move towards the conflict. Do not back away or hide.

That just makes the problem worse." That advice has always stayed with me. Here's how Jesus puts it: "So 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, and then come and offer your gift."

More great advice!

Problems not taken care of right away usually grow in size. When Harold Bloomfield learned that his father was dying of cancer, he resolved to visit him more often. This was not necessarily an easy thing to resolve, for there was quite a bit of coldness and estrangement between Harold and his father. The older Bloomfield had always been a stoic man, unable to or unwilling to communicate his feelings. Over the years, resentments had built up between the two of them and that made visits difficult for Harold. But knowing that his father had only six months to live, Harold decided that he just had to make the effort to be there for his father. The first visit between them was pretty routine, but on the second visit, Harold took a risk and did something completely unexpected: he told his father he loved him and he offered him a hug. This was unheard of in the Bloomfield family, and at first, Harold's father seemed completely unwilling to allow himself to be hugged. Harold, angry and hurt, wanted to forget the whole thing and leave. But then slowly, his father yielded to the hug. Over time, the elder Bloomfield began to loosen up and accept this new expression of love from his son. It was a major breakthrough when, after about two hundred hugs had passed between father and son, Harold's father finally blurted out the words, "I love you too son." This was the first time Harold remembered his father ever saying that. Instead of dying after six months, Harold's father lived for four more years. In this time, Harold and his father were able to communicate better, and share their feelings more deeply than Harold ever imagined they would. Harold found, too, that this new relationship with his father affected all the other relationships in his life. He could give love more freely and fully. And he found a measure of peace in his life that he had never known before. Think of the years lost because of the rupture of that relationship. But somebody took the first step, and things changed.

That's what I think Christ requires out of each of us. Jesus has given us the formula for making relationships work better. Remember, the inner emotion gives expression in the outer deed. If there are important relationships in your lives that are not what they can be, get busy, take some risks, work on figuring them out, and come

before the altar. There you'll find you have a lighter and more joy-filled heart, There you will find yourself ready to be nourished by the sacrament. There you will find yourself empowered to bring the reconciling work of God to those who need it most.