

Witness to Reconciliation

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January 18, 2015

In N. Ireland the Corrymeela Center has been a site of peacebuilding for over 50 years. I take students to Corrymeela each year, and each time I hear this story I get goose bumps. IRA and Ulster families who had lost loved ones to The Troubles arrived at Corrymeela, and tensions among the participants were high. These were Protestants and Catholics who were at war, and whose hatred was only intensified by their personal losses of loved ones to violence. Corrymeela seeks to bring people together, put them in face-to-face dialogue and work through the pain, anger, and even the hate. On this day, there was a service of remembrance in the small circular chapel. As each name was read, family members went to the center table and lit a candle in memory of their loved one. As one mother struggled to light a candle for her son -- as her hands were trembling and shaking so violently she couldn't steady the lighter -- a father, whose daughter was killed by *this* woman's son, approached, covered her hand in his, and together they guided lighter to wick.

This image epitomizes reconciliation for me.

One necessary condition for reconciliation seems to be 'Seeing The Other.' There is a Zulu greeting, "Sawubona," which means, "I see you," and the response, "Ngikhona," means "I am here." When I visited the Muskegon Correctional Facility with Curt Toftland, I met individuals whom we have made invisible to society. When I began to see these prisoners as people, as I saw the light, the Child of God within 'The Other,' when I tried to convey, "I see you, I see the Divine within you," their response was a resounding, "*Please, see me. I am here.*"

As Christians, we are told to 'turn the other cheek,' whereas we are more biologically determined for 'flight or fight.' Standing one's ground in the face of conflict (not in the Florida sense, but in the Christ sense!) -- not fleeing, not striking back, not even thwarting the blows -- is contrary to every instinct. As an abused child, I perfected the art of fleeing -- fleeing behind the couch! Ultimately, these experiences turned me into a fighter -- for every call for justice! At 11, I organized an ERA (Equal Rights Amendment) march around the town square, and at 12, the local newspaper implored me to limit the number of letters I submitted to the editor.

Only in the past few years have I learned that there is an alternative to fight or flight. It is the process of face-to-face dialogue. James 1:19 charges us to 'be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger,' and Ephesians 4:2 calls us to humility, forbearance, patience, and love.

The perpetrators of violence within my own family are dead, and I, honestly, had little desire to achieve *true reconciliation* while they were living. I forgave, and I maintained those relationships, but the relationships were forged upon superficiality and denial!

Perhaps, I am not alone. Do we, as a society, *really* want to do the difficult work of reconciliation with Whites, Native Americans and African Americans? Are we truly willing to own all that nastiness and hurt? Or, would we rather 'move on' and forge a pseudo relationship founded on superficiality and denial? Hide-your-identity workplace policies and marriage bans suggest we try not to 'see' our LGBTQ brothers and sisters. Separation, not reconciliation, seems to be the favored response in N. Ireland as over 90 walls topped with barb wire and glass presently separate Catholics from Protestants. Don't we just wish ISIS would go away?

WE may not want true reconciliation, but God, evidently, does.

In working with students engaging in Intergroup Dialogue, I think: "It can't work, it can't possibly work, this is craziness! That guy just made the most incredibly racist statement, and that young woman is now blinking back tears. That woman just said the most hateful thing about gays, not knowing that the person sitting next to her is lesbian. This is never going to work!"

But it does. Every time.

See. Turn. Engage. When we 'See the Other,' 'Turn our Cheek toward Conflict,' and 'Engage in face-to-face Dialogue,' we are not alone – the Holy Spirit is present. I believe it is the Holy Spirit that brought the two hands together to light that candle, it's the Holy Spirit that will bring Hope College to embrace diversity, and it is the Holy Spirit that will place our hands – in support and compassion - on the hands of those who have wronged us. It's perhaps not *OUR* will, but it is *God's* will. And when we engage the holy work of reconciliation, the Holy Spirit will take our hand.