



Story for all Ages – *The Zax* by Dr. Seuss

Reading “Because We Spill Not Only Milk”, by Nancy Schaffer.

Musical Interlude – *So Happy Together*, the Turtles.

Lyrics at <http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/cherish/happytogether.htm>

Sermon

When the Turtles released “Happy Together,” their first major hit, in 1967, song critics called it a parody of itself because the band was in such a different place than the happy little song that made them famous. The band started as a lightweight surf-rock group called the Crossfires in 1965. They sang about good times and girls and surfing. And then, the times changed, a lot. Surf-rock was out, and folk was in. Fluff was out and substance was in, so the band tried to rebrand themselves with a new name, “The Tyrtles” and the band did all right. But in 1966 they lost their drummer and bass player. In 1967 they lost their lead guitarist when John Lennon criticized him for trying to be like the Beatles and doing a bad job. What John Lennon may have seen is that they didn’t know who they were. They were chasing the times instead of making the times, and they weren’t happy together. In 1967, with half the band replaced, they recorded “Happy Together”, and lucky for them, it went to number 1 and even now, more than 40 years later, many of us still know the lyrics. It’s amazing to me that we have a whole group of junior youth visiting us from Eliot Chapel today and most of you could sing along with the song! Many of your parents weren’t even born in 1967! When I posted today’s sermon topic on Facebook and said we’d be singing “Happy Together” people started posting the lyrics too. Clearly this is a very loved song.

Who knows why a silly little song like this caught on? Maybe it was because the country was in a place where many of us weren’t Happy Together either. The streets were filled with protesters. One day it was the Vietnam War, the next it was Women’s Rights, and often it was Civil Rights. You could turn your TV on most nights and see authorities clashing with protesters. Body bags came home every week from the Vietnam War. The nuclear arms buildup, considered a pragmatic necessity in the 1950s, began to be seen as a dangerous waste of human and financial resources. Distrust abounded. Woodstock hadn’t happened yet, but the social unrest that fuelled it was growing. So maybe a happy little song which tells the story of a young man simply declaring his undying love for the girl he wants to spend his life with, touched a chord in a society that was deeply uneasy with the level of conflict that was spilling out of people’s hearts and onto the streets of their nation. Maybe the words “I can’t see me lovin’ nobody but you, for all my life,” seemed like a little antidote of simple comfort in a complex world where conflict seemed much more likely than peace.

Maybe the song isn’t silly at all. Perhaps this song points to the deep yearning in all of us to be loved and accepted, to find peace if not in the world, then maybe with that one person who will say, “No matter how they toss the dice, it has to be The only one for me is you. When you're with me, baby the skies'll be blue, For all my life.”

On the other hand, I wonder if this song is a parody of how we understand love. “If I should call you up, investment a dime, and you say you belong to me and ease my mind, imagine how the world could be, so very fine, so happy together.” Most of us invest a lot more than a dime in our relationships. We invest sweat blood and tears, hopes and dreams, and risk being disappointed over and over. Relationships aren’t always safe places, and sometimes they aren’t blue skies, and sometimes they don’t ease our mind. Our closest relationships may sometimes be the stormiest thing in our lives. It is those people we love most of all, those we are most vulnerable

to, who can hurt us so badly, and we have the power to hurt them the same way. This means we all have a greater stake in the relationship and more to lose if something goes wrong.

Today's sermon is about Conflict Transformation, and you may notice that I use the term Transformation rather than the more common Conflict Resolution, and that's because in the world of conflict management, they've started to see that the term Conflict Resolution can be problematic and misleading because it assumes that there can actually be resolution to conflict, or that resolution is the optimal goal. John Paul Lederach has spent most of his life helping others manage conflict, and back when conflict resolution was the predominant model, he spent a lot of time in Central America working for peace. He found that many Central Americans involved in conflict resolution came to distrust it because they felt it made resolution more important than process. The goal of resolution ended up prematurely setting aside differences, or silencing legitimate problems that needed to be addressed. It was as if the goal of having a life where skies are always blue was more important than staying in stormy weather and figuring out what was really going on. Conflict transformation creates a place where it becomes safe to continue disagreeing, and the goal isn't to fix a problem, but to grow in relationship by trying to understand each point of view, without committing to agreeing with it.

Let me give you an example of a tangible difference between conflict resolution and conflict transformation. If you've ever been engaged, you will know how people will give you little bits of well-meaning advice on how to have a happy marriage, and one of the standard pieces of advice often given is to never go to bed angry. Always make up before you go to sleep so that you can start the next day with a clean slate. I always wondered why I hated that piece of advice. What if it took all night to find a resolution and I didn't sleep and had to go to work the next morning feeling like crap? What if you ended up pretending to be all right so you would kiss and make up before you were ready, so you could get some sleep? What was more important? Getting along or keeping the door open to talking about what I needed, even if that meant risking another difficult conversation the next day? I'm sure I'm not alone in this. How many of you have, in moments of difficulty, decided to offer forgiveness or acceptance or understanding or an olive leaf before you were ready, all for the sake of getting along? And how long could that really last? How can there be peace without honesty?

That's what conflict resolution felt like to a lot of people, like it was forcing them to like each other and maybe even to make significant concessions, before they were ready to trust each other. I was so happy when someone dared to give me the advice to go to bed angry! That sometimes we're not our best at the end of the day, and that if I needed it, or if I felt unclear and unsure, I should give myself a night of rest to get in touch with what was going on inside me, and maybe be able to start with new insights and truths the next day. That just seemed so much more honest and realistic.

Conflict transformation is intended to be a much more honest process. The goal isn't simply to find a common resolution. Maybe there is no resolution. What do you do then? Just throw up your hands and say this isn't worth it? The goal is to build relationship regardless of whether there can be resolution. And, just as important, the goal is to build some respectful boundaries for how you disagree fairly so that if there's soul destroying conflict going on, that kind that leaves you locked in place like those Zaxs, maybe it can stop, so that even if you never end up liking each other or trusting each other, at least you can engage respectfully in a way that stops the damage.

One of the things I have become convinced of is that most conflict is a result of human fragility. Most conflict is not the result of any intention to create conflict or to do harm. Now I know there are exceptions, but that's what they are, exceptions, and I'm much more interested in the ordinary daily run of the mill kind of conflict that most of us experience in our lives, the kind of conflict that leads three members of a band to leave within a year.

In our reading today, Nancy Schaffer speaks of that kind of fragility. Because we spill milk. Because we forget. Because we say things and then can't take them back. Because we carry shame and loneliness and fear. Because we carry wounds we did not create. Because we created wounds we did not intend to. Because we wanted things

and did not know the consequences of wanting them. Because we gave away things we should never have let go of. Because sometimes the best we can do is what we think we should do. Some religions call this human depravity. Unitarian Universalism calls it fragility. I like this because it takes out the condemnation. We don't find ourselves in conflict because we are depraved, but because we are fragile. We collide with each other's fragilities and seek to protect our fragile selves from the imagined consequences of the collision.

Way back in the 6th century there was this monk called Dorotheas of Gaza, and he developed a theology that has been used in many conflict transformation models. In this theology, the sacred or God or the spirit of life is in the center, and all of life circles it like the rim of a wagon wheel. Our universal impulse is to connect back to the center, so imagine the spokes of a wagon wheel and we leave the rim of the wheel and travel down the spokes to merge with that center. In theistic terminology that is reconciliation with God. In Buddhism, it is the search for enlightenment. In non-theistic terminology it is the hunger for interconnection. Regardless of what you call it, the closer we come to the center, the closer we get to each other, and the closer we get to each other's fragilities. What this means, is that the closer we get to the center, the more likely we are to experience conflict, and what THIS means is that conflict is sacred. It lays bare our relationships to each other and how much we need to be known by each other, and how much we need each other's respect and love.

When you are in the presence of conflict, you are approaching the ultimate itself. There is tremendous power and possibility in our conflicts, if we can stay present to them, if we can resist the urge to make a false peace just because it's so uncomfortable, or to get so protective of our fragilities that we come out ready for war!

Just last month, our board passed a long awaited Covenant of Right Relations and a process to follow when we enter into conflict. This policy is not about forcing peace and it doesn't try to fix anything because when you are in conflict with someone else, that is your responsibility. If this policy told us it's the church's job to solve all these conflicts we'd simply be enabling a lot of people. But it does offer a path to keep the communication open and fair. The only thing is we can enforce is behavior. You can feel any way you like about someone, but when someone's behavior damages congregational life, it is the place of this congregation to set boundaries. This policy sets out a process for how to you do that fairly and considerately, and also firmly. I would encourage you to have a look at this policy, it's on our website and it is really very informative.

The Committee on Ministry spent two years creating this process and the discussions we had were fascinating because there is nothing neutral about conflict, and so many times we had to question what we thought about conflict. We learned that we weren't hungry for conflict resolution, but for conflict transformation, and I would go home thinking about my own response to conflict, and how hard it was for me to keep the doors open when I felt attacked or misunderstood, and how that lead to me being the one misunderstanding or attacking. I thought about how scared we are of conflict, it feels so dangerous, and I will admit that like man of us, in the heat of the moment, the holy doesn't feel just a few inches away on that spoke I'm travelling on, it feels so far away, but I can see that even in the conflict I experience in my own life, that is the farthest thing from the truth. When my fragilities crash against someone else's, my heart is actually getting close to a holy place and that it's time for me to toss the dice, and I will be all right, and that it's the way we live through the storms that will take us to that blue sky and closer to those we love.

The power of that little song, "Happy Together" is that this band, that almost fell apart, that struggled to know who it was, could stand in the midst of a stormy society filled with tension and possibility, kind of like ours today, and sing these words of hope,

"Me and you and you and me
No matter how they toss the dice, it has to be
The only one for me is you, and you for me
So happy together

I can't see me lovin' nobody but you
For all my life
When you're with me, baby the skies'll be blue
For all my life”

On stormy days, and on the days when the skies are bluest, may the spirit be with you. May you know that it is always near and you are never alone.

Amen and blessed be.

Sources

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