

Love Under the Rug

September 6, 2020

The first home I bought had been in foreclosure, and the previous owners had expressed their frustration by vandalizing the house on their way out the door. They disconnected some of the wiring to electrical outlets, and the air conditioner, spray painted some walls with graffiti, and dumped pots and pots of coffee on the carpets.

Because cash was tight with all of the painting, moving, and closing costs, my plan was to do my best to clean the carpets, and live with the stains for as long as I could handle it. Thank goodness my mother owned a carpet cleaner, because I ended up cleaning those carpets at least a dozen times. They were soooooo nasty, but I was scared of what I would find underneath, and so I scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed, and then finally resigned myself to enduring the ugly stains. I knew the carpets were clean, and resigned myself to waiting to tear them out until I saved the money to have the floors below refinished.

As luck would have it, there ended up being plumbing issues that needed to be addressed, and I had to replace the roof shortly after moving in. It ended up being years before I had the money set aside to refinish the floors. When the time finally came, I took a couple of days off of work, moved everything out of the dining room, bought a bunch of spare blades for my utility knife, and went to town.

Wouldn't you know, the floors under the ugly, stained, bright aqua carpet were in decent shape! They still could use to be refinished, but they were nice. Presentable. Much nicer than the awful, stained, aqua carpet I had endured for years.

As I cut the carpet down the middle, rolled it into chunks, and scraped up the crumbling foam pad below, all I could think of was how gross the carpet was, along with everything it carried with it—the dust mites and dead skin and who knows what else of previous owners.

All of this is to paint a vivid picture of the idea of “sweeping something under the rug.” We've all done it. We decide not to deal with someone's behavior, even though it is troublesome. We disregard warning signs for the sake of keeping the peace. Heck, I even found myself literally sweeping crumbs under the rug once this summer, when my mother-in-law called to say that they were in the neighborhood and wanted to drop by.

Sweeping things under the rug is about hiding a mess, as in the visit from my mother-in-law, but even more, it's about not dealing with something now and putting off our inevitable reckoning. Eventually, I had to find a dust pan to sweep up the crumbs. Eventually, I had to tear up the nasty carpet in my first dining room. And eventually, if

we are going to be healthy and have rich, meaningful relationships, we have to deal with the conflict and discord among us that it is so tempting to sweep under the rug.

What are some of the things you sweep under the rug? What do you avoid engaging?

So here's where we "go deep": What in yourself needs to heal, so that you don't avoid these things any longer? In the examples I gave, I needed to stop fearing that I couldn't deal with what was under the stained carpet, needed to get over the fact that getting to the hardwood would mean dealing with decades of other people's dust mites. AND, I need to stop looking for my mother-in-law's approval.

The Dalai Lama is quoted as saying, "Many people today agree that we need to reduce violence in our society. If we are truly serious about this, we must deal with the roots of violence, particularly those that exist within each of us. We need to embrace 'inner disarmament,' reducing our own emotions of suspicion, hatred and hostility toward our brothers and sisters." For many of us, part of 'inner disarmament' is developing the courage and right judgment to speak the truth with love, especially when it's tempting to sweep things under the rug.

Today's Gospel is one of those rare passages that is direct and to the point. And yet, even in its simplicity, many of us find it difficult to implement: If you have a problem with someone, talk with them one on one. If they listen, your relationship is restored.

The passage goes on to advocate for step-by-step, progressive escalation when dealing with conflict, talk one on one with someone, then bring in a third party, then address it in a group setting, culminating in treating the individual as a Gentile or a tax collector if they still don't listen to you. In some ways, it's oddly comforting that Jesus addresses being conflict avoidant in the Bible, telling us that brushing interpersonal difficulties under the rug isn't a modern phenomenon, but one that this has been a part of social dynamics for millenia.

But once we get beyond this biblical schadenfreude, committing ourselves once again to healthy patterns of communication, including not sweeping things under the rug, is an Godly, faith-filled way of being. Giving and receiving honest feedback is critical to being able to be in relationship, to building God's beloved community, not just a clique of people who think in lock-step with one another.

Eric Barreto of Princeton Theological Seminary points out:

To be clear, this is no mere handbook for resolving conflicts. Simply following this order of confrontation will not ensure a result consonant with God's hopes. It is not as simple as moving through these steps. We know that the mechanics of decision-making do not always reflect our values. Checking off these duties step-by-step will not guarantee a decision rooted in God's love for us. This process

could so easily be co-opted by selfishness and dislike and so many human frailties. Instead, what matters here is the concern for the other and the community imbedded in these steps.

This is where the intersection of our two scripture passages today gives us synergy. While the passage from Matthew 18 teaches us to be direct in our dealing with conflict, and not sweep things under the rug, the passage from Romans reminds us that God's rule of love, love of neighbor as self, must be our central to how we engage one another.

Amidst our current context of COVID, with systemic racism in our collective consciousness more than ever before, Moravian theologian Audrey West points out that, "The process of truth-telling and accountability enjoined in this passage best takes place with careful attention to the church's call to protect the disempowered, vulnerable, walking alongside in solidarity as they speak up about the harm they have experienced."

Friends, Jesus' call to good communication and interpersonal interaction may seem simple, but all of us have known the destructiveness of hushed conversations, of hiding and avoiding, of refusing or being unable to speak honestly, of molehills becoming mountains because of being swept under the rug.

Host of NPR's "On Being," Krista Tippett reminds us "Truth can be told in an instant, forgiveness can be offered spontaneously, but reconciliation is the work of lifetimes and generations." Our project, in a life of faith, is to strive toward reconciliation.

My prayer, not just for this instant or the coming weeks, but for our lifetimes, even generations, is that we will be able to build deeper, stronger, more Godly relationships by having the courage not to sweep things under the rug, but rather speak the truth in love. May it be so!

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