

26 Tevet, 5772 (15/01/12) *Community: Our Corporate Spiritual Identity* J. M. Terrett
Redemptive Fellowship: Eph. 4:31, 32; Col 3:12, 13; Matt. 18:15-18

Vayera And I Appeared He is in Final Control

Torah: Ex. 6:2-9:35

(1) 7:25 – there passed seven days after the L-RD struck the river.

(2) 8:15 – it is the finger of G-d

(3) 8:18 – there will be no venomous flies in Goshen – distinction by L-RD in the midst of the land.

(4) 9:30 – I know that you and your people do not yet fear the L-RD G-d

Haftarah: Ezek. 28:25-29:21

(5) 29:11 – Egypt shall remain 40 years uninhabited (because of the rebellious help they gave)

(6) 29:14 – I will bring back the captives of Egypt and they shall form a feeble kingdom (hobbled)

Brit Chadashah: Rev. 16:1-21

(7) 16:1 – seven cups of the wrath of G-d (upon the whole earth)

Ps. 48 Jewish hero Moses (he knew what he had to do and did not give up)

It is not always an easy thing to maintain good relationships between members of the same family or the same community for several reasons and it seems that people reach a certain point of intimacy or friendship and things begin to unravel and things get stuck in a hostile, blocked mode – even in a spiritual community such as ours.

Good conflict resolution procedures are essential to maintain our grasp of our corporate spiritual identity – and are also essential for us to retain our grasp of the spiritual identity we share with all previous generations of believers who have also encountered the need to learn about redemptive fellowship (which means good conflict resolution procedures).

There are three passages I would like to examine with you this morning which talk about how we should learn to relate to each other, the more we get to know each other, if we want to maintain a corporate identity which is spiritual and not carnal – which will bring us together and not tear us apart.

You see, we cannot just all just wish to get along and hope that if we are nice to each other, and pretend that everything is fine, that there will be no conflicts – we have to be able to deal with the dirty laundry if we want to remain healthy and strong as a community.

People make mistakes, people have bad days, people disagree and people misunderstand and get on each other's nerves and people get tired of each other and of dealing with the same problems again and again. In the past I have said that people's lives eventually become metaphors – that is the issues on the inside eventually come out and it seems that no matter what people do or where they go or really what happens to them, they seem to eventually end up dealing with the same core of issues and concerns.

We are all born with a temperament – a permanent way (personal perspective) of looking at the world, which gets stronger and stronger, the older we get and can either enrich our own lives and the lives of those around us, or it can trap us and the people we deal with in a revolving and recycling rut of unresolved issues and perpetual conflict (have I just described how most families and most marriages – and eventually most friendships turn out).

In my years for ministry, I have deal with the migratory nature of many believers, where things seem to go well for a while, until conflict happens, for whatever reason and they move on and things seem to go well somewhere else, or with someone else, until the same unresolved issues catch up and eventually choke things all over again and it is time to move on again.

I would like to call this a kind of slash and burn, primitive fellowship, like that which occurs in the jungles of the world. A tribe of village cuts down the beautiful rain forest and burns out an area to grow crops and instead of practicing good rotation and fertilization techniques, when the nutrients they have robbed from the lush forest are exhausted, they leave this depleted soil to recover and move on to slash and burn another section of the forest (and turn some of the most productive soils in the world into some of the most barren and unproductive).

It may seem somewhat pessimistic and an all too accurate description of how too many relationships always end up, as believers migrate between communities, between friendships and even now, between relationships and marriages. The problem is that instead of practicing good soil rotation and fertilization with friendships and with communities, too many people just know how to build slash and burn relationships and when all the initial nutrients (the first stages of intimacy) are exhausted, they do not know how to deal with the relational problems that all of our temperaments cause.

Consequently, they just keep moving on to repeat the same pattern elsewhere, again and again, until they either run out of forest or they run out of places to go and they give up on spiritual communities. Spiritual communities and all human relationships have the potential to keep on turning into primitive slash and burn friendships, unless we learn to renew or to redeem the way we relate to people and in the way we learn to let people relate to us.

Let's look at the passages and derive some principles of good relational agriculture which is renewable and which will sustain us on our pilgrimage from the cradle to the grave, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile.

Eph. 4:31. 32: "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tender hearted, forgiving one another as G-d in Christ has forgiven you."

There are ten functions in this passage – six negative and four positive and the indication is that conflicts will happen and it is how we respond to them that determines how they will turn out. The closer you get to someone the more of their flaws you see and the more of your flaws they see. What are you going to do with this privileged information?

Too often I have heard people say: "You don't really know them" or "You don't know the real person, the side they never show in public" or worse yet "wait until you really get to know them and you'll see". There is an element of truth in these statements, but it is only the slash and burn truth and not the redemptive truth. Until we come to terms with people's downsides, we cannot come to terms with our own dark side. We need to forgive as radically and as completely as we are forgiven.

We also need to stick around and work on forgiving and being forgiven, and not just move on when the same kinds of issues crop up again and again. A conflict is either a learning opportunity where we restore nutrients to soil of the relationship or it is us and them pulling in our roots and getting ready to pull up

stakes because we have not extended or received the forgiveness which G-d extended to us and which we have received, which leads me to my next passage.

Col. 3:12, 13: “As G-d’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another, and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the L-rd has forgiven you, so you must also forgive.”

This passage also has ten functions: three which deal with our identity; five which deal with our clothing and two which deal our double responsibility towards one another.

When G-d chose us, we were strangers and we were uncouth, unspiritual and did not understand how to be members of the community He wants to build in our midst, so He made us holy (separate) and filled us with His love, so that we could show compassion (give each other seven times seventy breaks a day), kindness (not striking back or being pulled into the win lose trap), and learn humility (hey, it might be us who are in the wrong [again]).

We also need meekness (not weakness, but power under control to do good and not become a relational tsunami, cutting a wide swath of destruction –of which we are all capable) and lots of patience (not just giving up after one or two tries, but being committed to do all that is possible to not break the bond which restores nutrients to the relational soil of the community – i.e. picking up our toys and going somewhere else to play in a pout).

We are called to carry one another and be like the marines – we never leave one of our own behind – we walk, crawl or are carried back, whether we win or whether we retreat to get a better position. We are also called to exercise our primarily relational forgiveness, not with strangers, but with each other – we are to be channels of forgiveness, passing on the forgiveness we have received AND understanding that if we cut off our forgiveness of others our forgiveness is also cut off.

The initial company manners and adjustments we make we get to know people wear out as we move from public to social behaviour – and relate to one another at times when we have not had time to dress up, clean up and present our best face. There is a kind of relating where we get down to business and deal with some of the stuff which ain’t pretty, but which is needed if we are to be able to be a group which is actually bonded and not just polite, which brings me to my final passage and answers the question – mhow do we deal with that wonderful spice of life – conflict.

Matt. 18:15-18: “If another member of the community (church) sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the community and if the offender refuses to listen even to the community, let such a one be to you as a stranger (Gentile) and a tax collector. Truly I tell you that whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth, will be loosed in heaven.”

The more you know about the people, the easier it is to see their faults, but it cuts both ways, ours become obvious too. You see, mature, non slash and burn fellowship understands that we need to reach that point of group knowledge where we know and realize each other’s limits – what we are and what we are not capable of. Until we have taken each other’s measure, we cannot really work together, because life applies pressure on us and on others and unless we can become a community which helps and heals and protects

and restores, we remain a crowd which may have fun when the sun shines, but which scatters when the rain falls or when the snow flies. But working things out is a delicate matter.

When our Messiah gathered twelve men together, there were conflicts and personality clashes and He wanted us to understand that we need a conflict resolution process in place, not to protect our rights or give anyone the advantage over anyone else, but to protect the soil where our relationship grows and is nourished. Conflicts will happen, as well as offenses and instead of turning on each other and chewing on each other, we isolate the problem, on a case by case basis and prevent it from spreading and preventing our community from taking anyone's side on any issue.

We are a generational community of pilgrims who are called to move together from the cradle to the grave and to learn how to bond together and not become a gang or a pack, where the toughest, the smartest or the sneakiest rules and feed on the weaker ones. We are a flock where there is one shepherd who wants to help us to graze together – and to raise crop after crop of good love and fellowship on the same plot of ground, season after season, as we resolve conflict after conflict – those which come in from the outside and those which are generated from the inside.

The process is simple and I want to close with this. If you have a problem with any community member concerning anything, first try and deal with it directly, so that we learn to communicate and to share and not to fight and bicker. If we are unable to sort things out, we take referees, not so our side can win, but so that the game is fair.

I was once a referee and I had to be impartial to make sure the rules were followed – AND in the Messiah, forgiveness is a rule and all of us will take turns needing to exercise it and needing to receive it. The witnesses we take are there to help with resolution and understanding and never to corner or isolate anyone so we can take them apart. This is a kind of gang mentality which exists among school children and adolescents and is one of the biggest barriers to productivity in the business world – and in the spiritual world. Often when we are on our high horse, we fail to see the whole picture and need to broaden the perspective, in order to find the solution and not in order to broaden the conflict.

If the problem is beyond the expertise of a few, then we involve the whole community, again, in order to protect the community and everyone in it and never to give advantage to one over another or to punish another in the name of another. If this does not work, then the one hanging on to the conflict and wanting to prolong the fight, is removed from the flock so that peace can be restored.

Some conflicts take a long time to resolve and some conflicts infect whole communities if we ever forget that the object is forgiveness and restoration, and not punishment and power. One of the biggest essentials of community, and that which prevents them from becoming slash and burn communities is this commitment to voluntary resolution and forgiveness.

We exist to glorify our Master and to work things out together, especially as we get to know one another's limits and abilities, the real people behind the company manners. This is where all the unresolved conflicts are resolved and those metaphors – those inner issues are brought up so that we can renew our soil and nurture one another and build in solid seasons, so that we do not keep coming apart when the company manners wear out.

In Ephesians we are reminded to put aside our slash and burn gang mentality. In Colossians we are reminded to base our conflict resolution on forgiveness. In Matthew we are shown how to limit the damage and prevent conflicts from tearing the community apart, because we want to base our living on healthy sustainable and renewable community forgiveness and not keep on repeating the same mistakes repeatedly, so we never settle down and untie those knots which keep us from growing in His grace and love. More about this next week.

Lets pray.