

New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, January 20, 2019
Rev. Dr. David Thompson

Third Way Thinking: Solving Difficult Problems!

Text: “If there is a serious injury you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth...
Exodus

“You have heard it said: eye for an eye tooth for a tooth, but I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the cheek turn the other also... Jesus

I want today to talk about one of the most difficult problems we face as a world and how to get beyond it. This problem is behind every crisis we face today. The shutdown of Government in the US is moving to legendary proportions with Donald Trump’s insistence on a wall and the Democrats refusal to fund it with taxpayer’s money. And the people being held to ransom are the government workers who are being used for leverage and to put pressure on lawmakers.

Brexit is another example where there is conflict that drags on in Britain.

This problem is behind the Palestinian Israeli conflict, behind terrorist groups such as ISIS and Al Qaeda. It is the problem in our system of law courts. It is found in the church and in city councils and companies.

- It is behind the following list of problems:
- a conflict between a boss and workers
- a marriage with irreconcilable differences.
- a dispute with our child’s school.
- a situation that puts us into financial trouble
- a critical decision that affects our job.
- an issue in the neighborhood or community
- family members who quarrel all the time and who now won’t speak to one another at all.
- a weight problem,
- a job that doesn’t satisfy
- a child who won’t launch into the world
- a tough problem you need to solve for a customer
- an issue that might take you into court

What is the problem behind all these challenges?

It is polarized thinking.

Polarized thinking sees the world in either-ors/ my way vs. your way. Polarization suggests that there are only two ways to think. My way versus your way. We dig into our positions and fight one another either with words, lawsuits or bombs.

Stephen Covey has written a landmark book called: The Third Alternative: Solving Life's most Difficult problems.

When people are dug in on their side of an issue Covey suggests that both sides of an issue need to be challenged to ask one very important question: Are we willing to go for a solution that is better than any of us have come up with yet?

When both sides are prepared to ask this vital question; when they are really prepared to listen to each other with empathy and without trying to argue back, when both sides search for new possibilities, then both sides are in a position to create a third alternative which neither side has thought of before. When this happens excitement and creativity are unleashed, and synergy is born.

There is a joke told about a third alternative solution, concerning Hector McTavish, a Presbyterian living in Newfoundland.

Each Friday night after work, sun, snow or rain, Hector, being a Newfie, would fire up his outdoor grill and cook a moose steak.

But, all of Hector's neighbors were Catholics. And since it was Lent, they were forbidden from eating meat on Fridays.

The delicious aroma from the grilled moose steaks was causing such a problem for the Catholic faithful that they finally talked to their priest. The priest came to visit Hector and suggested that the only alternative between Presbyterian and Catholic was for Hector to become a Catholic. There was no third way.

So, after several classes and much study, Hector attended Mass, and as the priest sprinkled holy water over him, he said: "You were born a Presbyterian and raised a Presbyterian, but now you are a Catholic."

At first Hector's neighbours were greatly relieved, that was until three weeks later on a Friday night, the wonderful aroma of grilled moose meat once again filled the neighborhood.

The priest was called immediately by the neighbours, and, as he rushed into Hector's yard, clutching a rosary and preparing to scold him, he stopped and watched in amazement.

There stood Hector, clutching a small bottle of holy water which he was carefully sprinkling over the grilling meat and chanting: "You wuz born a moose, you wuz raised a moose, but now you is a Codfish!"

If there was just one problem, we could solve on this planet in human relations for me it would be this one: Polarized positions! "It's my way or the highway."

When Obama was President, Benjamin Netanyahu went to the polarized American Congress to take his case to one side, the Republicans. For him the President's initiative with Iran was a bad deal. Again, we saw polarized thinking. It was the President of Israel's way, or no way, and he didn't mind if he dissed the President of the United States in the process of his two-alternative thinking.

Israel and Palestine are locked into an eye for an eye tooth for a tooth barbarism on a daily basis. There is no third way for either side. The polarities run destructively deep.

It is the same with the system of lawyers and law courts in Canada and the US. We have a counsel for the defense and a prosecutor in most cases. It is win or lose and because legal defense and prosecution is expensive, both parties actually lose money whether they win or lose the case. There is some coming hope here with alternative dispute resolution getting a little stronger and restorative justice being used from time to time, however overall, it is still win/ lose and the courts are set up that way.

It is the same in Politics. Liberal versus conservative, the ruling majority and the minority of her majesty's loyal opposition. So, it is pro the pipeline to the coast or against the pipe line because of environmental reasons such as Climate change. No Third way!

In the Canadian Presbyterian Church, we are still debating whether to ordain gays or to ban gay ordination, and churches are willing to split over this issue as they have done in the USA and leave The national Church in holy disgust over their liberal brothers and sisters. For them there is no third way. It is their way, or the highway and they are off and driving away from the unity for which St Paul pleaded...

On the personal level of conflict, it is the same. It is 'he said/ she said' and we battle it out in court with two alternative thinking. It is win and lose most of the time in divorce settlements unless a third way is chosen.

So, what do we do about this massive world problem and this problem on the personal level as well?

When Jesus encountered polarized thinking, he always thought of a third way around the problem. The problem we face in the Middle East today is a cycle of violence. It is the eye for an eye syndrome. You hit me I hit you back and it cycles endlessly. Jesus was not happy with this Old Testament writing and so he overturned it and suggested a third way- "I say to you love your enemies do good to those who despitefully use you, Even so you will be children of your father in heaven who brings his rain on the just and the unjust."

Do you remember what Jesus did when a woman caught in the act of adultery was brought before him for judgment? One position was that the woman must die. The other position was the woman's who wanted to live. What was Jesus to do? The law was clear- she should be stoned to death. So, Jesus pauses and writes in the sand and when pressed by the multitude who are anxious to stone her, he suddenly says "Let the person without sin cast the first stone!" And slowly the crowd melts away. The third alternative at work! No one is there who is worthy to condemn her so she must be set free- so says Jesus.

Remember the story of the Prodigal son? The prodigal leaves home, spends all of his father's money and is reduced to penury. For the elder brother this brother of his is a wastrel and not worthy of further consideration. It is black and white. As far as the elder brother is concerned it is his way and the younger brother can hit the highway.

The father in the story is a figure for God. The father uses the third way. He puts his ring of authority on the young wastrel's hand, he puts his best robe on the prodigal, he brings about a feast for his return, killing the calf that they had been fattening. Instead of punishment the prodigal is celebrated for being alive. The father loves him back into the family. However, the 2-way thinking elder brother can't handle it and stays away from the party. And in doing so misses out on all the joy.

The elder brother is self-righteous, based on his thinking. He has done everything right and his brother everything wrong so why should he go along with this third alternative?

So, he is right, and joyless. The father however is full of joy! He wants to party big time and he wants the elder brother to come in from the field where he has gone in disgust. The father is gracious and operates by grace, not merit; and in that he is like God. Jesus' point is the same: let the person without sin cast the first stone. If that is the criterion then all of us are doomed unless God uses a third way- the way of deep profound GRACE and forgiveness.

In South Africa, Bishop Tutu and Nelson Mandela set up a third way to avoid bloodshed. Instead of long trials and sentencing and putting people in prison Mandela and Tutu set up The Truth and Reconciliation Commission. If you were willing to confess everything you had done, then you could be forgiven by those you had wronged. This Third Way approach saved South Africa from a bloodbath. There is no question of that.

In India, Gandhi chose a Third Way. Instead of fighting the British in armed combat or through terrorism, Gandhi advocated nonviolent protest- a third way and eventually he won India from the British through moral suasion.

Martin Luther King Jr. did the same in America. Instead of advocating violence to get equality, he taught and modeled nonviolence and liberated the African Americans with that Third Way.

In the general Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, nearly every year, the question of Gay ordination rises again and again.

There is a difference in the Canadian Presbyterian church and the American. It is a very small phrase “No one is allowed to follow a divisive course.”

Let's recognize it: either polarity is divisive. If we ban gay ordination that is divisive. If we sustain it, that is divisive. It is a catch 22. Unless we follow what that directive says: Neither side is to follow a divisive course. That opens up the possibility of a Third Way of thinking. It also opens up the possibility of synergy – celebrating the many gifts of the gay community instead of excluding them. A third way is not compromise where there are winners and losers. It is a better way for all. Are we willing to think of a better way than we have thought of? That is the challenge!

Have you ever had a contractor work on your home and the work has gone bad? Here is a Third Way synergy story for you.

Stephen Covey had a friend who was finishing his dream home. It was a work of art with high ceilings and painstakingly carved wood moldings. Then the painter came to add the last touches.

When the owner came home, he almost collapsed. The paint job was ruinous. In every room every molding was defaced with smeared uneven paint. There were smudges on doors and tiles. Paint dribbled down arched windows. It looked as if a child had been at work with a paintbrush or spray can.

Stephen's friend called the contractor who came over immediately. When he saw the work, his jaw fell open. And he immediately phoned the painter and asked him to come to the house.

Stephen's friend expected that the contractor would chew out the painter and fire him and demand his money back plus damages.

Instead he met the painter at the door and shook hands with him.

The painter was a young man, barely out of his teens, who grinned and asked the contractor nervously how he liked his work? The contractor put his arm around him and walked him coolly through the house, pointing at this and that problem and then all three sat down to talk. The contractor asked a few questions and it became clear that the painter had overstated his qualifications in order to get the job... in fact this was the first house he had ever painted!

The contractor continued to ask questions to the young man about his family, where he had gone to school, what his life had been like. Stephen's friend wondered why this had any relevance, but he didn't interrupt. They soon learned that the boy had struggled in school and dropped out, gotten married very young and had a wife and baby to support. Obviously, he was trying to make a living the only way he could think of.

When they stood up the contractor apologized to Stephen's friend for not checking out the painter before hiring him. Then he asked the boy to bring into the house his painting equipment. Calmly he said to the boy "I'm going to teach you how to do this kind of job right."

Stephen's friend was doubtful of this strategy but went off to bed shrugging his shoulders.

Every day after that, the contractor and the painter worked together, laughing as they cleaned windows, scrubbed smudges away, sanded and repainted walls. At the end under the contractor's supervision the job was magnificent!

In the months that followed, the young man apprenticed to the contractor and became more and more capable until he could do the work exactly as the older man specified... He became the contractor's painter of choice and soon had more jobs than he could handle.

Covey says: "This small-town contractor proved that synergy minded people are full of surprises. Instead of firing the painter in a huff or worse, ruining him with demands for damages- he chose to help the young man build a life and, in the process, become a valuable asset to his own business.

When Stephen's friend's lawyer showed up, she assured his friend that he had handled things well. There would be no lawsuit, no court fight, no demolition of a vulnerable young family. No 1st alternative wrestling the 2nd alternative. No demands for fairness or justice or equity.

After studying this for years, it is my own considered opinion that Jesus wants us all as Christians to become Third Way alternative thinkers at work, in our schools or businesses and in our church.

If the Session at New St. James and the Board approached all things with Third Way thinking, we could move beyond two alternative thinking into an exciting kind of synergy where Jesus lived and thought, where it becomes win / win.

I believe that this third way thinking would transform New St. James and help to assure its future under God in London.

"The Law of synergy or Win/Win says," Let's not do it your way or my way; let's do it the best way".

Jimmy Carter says, "Unless both sides win, no solution can be permanent."

Becoming a Third way thinker releases creativity, excitement and joy!