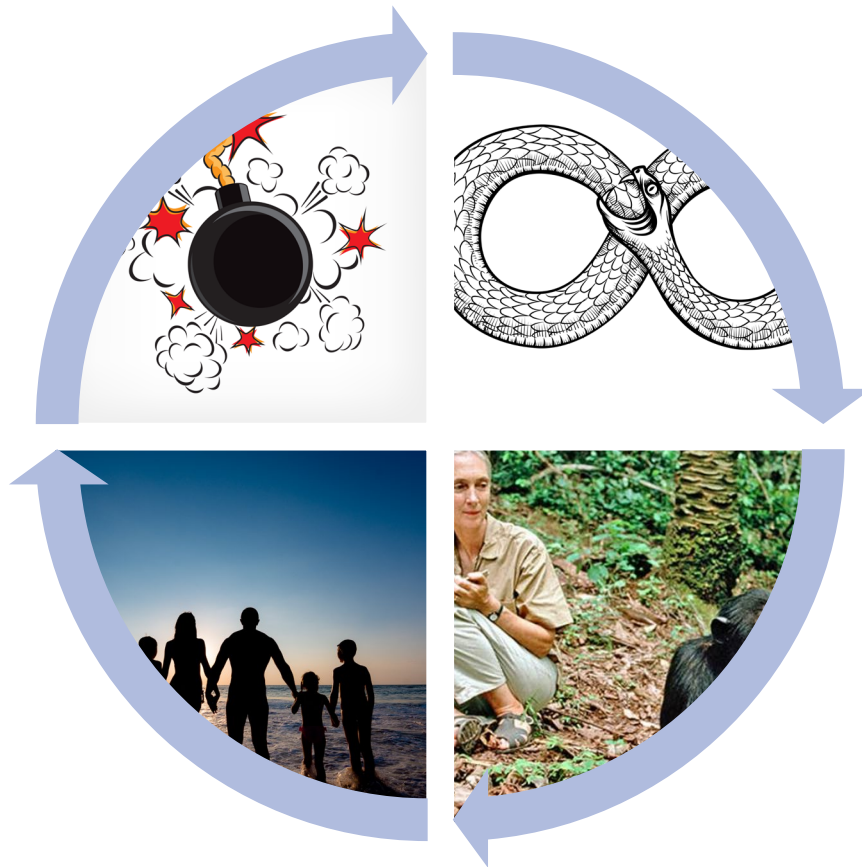


I Love to Tell the Story



Narratives for Conflict Transformation

Jen Fraser and Brad Munroe

A Church Under Duress – the gathering storm

Located in Old Downtown, First Church was the center of life for a large portion of the community. It had a thriving children's and youth ministry, lots of small groups, and good attendance each week. When pastor Tom retired after a 20-year tenure, First Church hired their first woman pastor, Linda. Shortly after she arrived at the church, her leadership would be tested severely.

A year and a week after Linda's arrival, the town suffered a catastrophic flood. Church members, under Linda's leadership, organized a rapid response to save the historic organ and several artifacts from the church's 150-year history. Once the valuables were secured offsite a small but committed team began to assess the damage. It was determined that restoring the building would cost well over what the insurance would cover. A congregational meeting was held at a school in the neighboring town where the difficult decision was made to sell the historic building and move the church to higher ground.

Having been given the go-ahead, Linda and the team got to it. The purchase of the new property and the move was a monumental event for the community and many thanked God, publicly and privately, for sending them Linda, with her strong leadership skills, to guide them through the task.

The congregation seemed more united than ever. Recovering from the flood and settling into the new location took a little over two years, but the new building was beautiful. The expansive grounds allowed for a labyrinth and a columbarium. The church now enjoyed a commercial kitchen, a light-filled narthex, and a modern, semi-circular worship space with built-in projectors and screens. Linda and the group of leaders who were responsible for the recovery and the move managed the new project down to the last detail, including coordinating the colors of the carpet perfectly with the stained-glass windows. While the town was still reeling from the damage of the flood, the church seemed to have emerged triumphant, better than ever. With the installation of the historic organ, the project was complete. Finally, the church members could relax and worship in peace.

But, like every major project, not all flowed smoothly. While the carpet brought out the earth tones of the pew cushions, it also dampened the acoustics, forcing the organist to play louder, which drowned out the choir and the singing on one side of the sanctuary. Those on the other side of the sanctuary said the organ was deafening, while those in the middle claimed they couldn't tell the difference. After worship, people took sides. For some the rallying cry became, "I want to make a joyful noise to the Lord, but instead I'm squawking to hear myself over that blasted organ!" The other side whispered, "That organ is a part of the town's history! With all we have been through we need to hear it more than ever."

Linda and her group hunkered down in a closed-door meeting to tackle the problem. After investigating the options, they came up with a solution. They would install upgraded speakers in various places in the sanctuary, cutting out the reverberation. The total price was estimated at \$55,000. It was an expensive solution that drained the last of the money set aside for the move. But it seemed to solve the problem, allowing the church to get back on track--for now, at least.

The next problem emerged in the fall when the sun's path shifted northward, creating a glare on the screens during the first service. Initially they thought they could ride it out, but as the days drew on, the glare extended into the second service. Once again, Linda and her group met to come up with a solution: mechanical shutters for the clerestory windows that extended throughout the entire north end of the sanctuary. The cost would be \$30,000. This time they would have to

take money from two separate endowment funds, which would require a congregational meeting. Linda assured the team, “We can get approval between worship services. They’ll just have to know this is not negotiable.”

The email went out to the congregation announcing the meeting and the proposal to move the money out of the endowment funds. It caught Norma’s eye. While everyone in the church seemed so happy about how everything turned out, Norma who had been a member all her life, was uneasy, though she couldn’t quite put her finger on what the problem was. The shutters seemed like a good solution but the endowment funds were restricted for organ maintenance. It was just one more decision in a series of decisions that seemed to be happening too quickly. Norma wasn’t even sure what committee was working on these issues related to the move. If she could find that out, she might ask to join it.

That evening, after choir practice, Norma caught up to Frank as she walked toward her car.

“Boy, these expenses for the new sanctuary just never seem to stop.” Frank had once been on Buildings and Grounds so Norma thought he might have an opinion about it. He jumped right in.

“Yep, it sure does seem that way. You gotta be careful with projects like this that you don’t dig yourself a hole you can’t get out of.”

Norma paused. Frank weighed whether to continue.

“But what’s worse,” he started slowly, “is those damn shutters won’t last a year before the mechanism wears out.”

“What makes you say that?” Norma asked, relieved to hear someone say something critical about Linda’s ideas. At times, she thought, it seemed as if she had taken over the role of the church’s savior, as well as its pastor.

Norma and Frank’s parking lot conversation lasted over an hour. They evaluated each step in the moving process, careful to give Linda credit for the successes. And yet, for the first time, they giddily named the failures out loud.

“It started with that carpet, you know,” Frank said. “She must have fallen in love with it because of the way it matched those pew cushions.”

“And why in the world did we need carpet?” Linda chimed in, shaking her head. “The old building had such nice acoustics. They never took that into consideration.”

“You know why, don’t you?”

“No, why?”

“She wants to get rid of the organ. She hates that thing.”

“Is *that* why she wants to take the money out of the organ maintenance fund?”

Norma was emboldened by her late-night conversation with Frank. She started to test the waters with others, floating an innocent comment about the cost of the shades, or asking a question about how they were supposed to work. She could tell within seconds how her conversation partner felt about things. If there was even a hint of a defensive tone Norma knew that she was talking to a devoted Linda supporter. If the person paused and looked down, sighed, or ever so slightly

rolled their eyes, she knew they were privately questioning things. As the number of people in the “questioning leadership” camp piled up, Norma felt it might be the time to act.

On Sunday, after the first service, people milled back into the sanctuary, taking their seats for the congregational meeting. Linda led the opening prayer and then sat back down in the first pew. Juan stepped up to the microphone and began to lay out the plan for the shades.

“A motion has been made that the \$17,000 from designated account 3452 and \$13,000 from designated account 6723 be allocated for the purchase of mechanical shades for the clerestory windows.”

Linda stood up and stepped forward to the microphone. “Coming from a committee, the motion doesn’t need a second. Any discussion?”

The room was silent. Norma looked around the sanctuary at the faces of the people she had known for years. The “Linda” camp was looking up, scanning the pews while they waited to vote, while those in the “questioning” camp looked down as if they had a renewed interest in the carpet. Even Frank was looking at his fingernails. “Something is really wrong,” she whispered to herself.

Norma spoke. “I’m wondering if there are alternative sources of funding?”

“The moderator recognizes member Norma Miller. Please restate your question from the microphone.”

Norma walked toward the microphone, a little shaken. Linda’s tone triggered Norma’s memory of the rules of order. “Thank you madame moderator. Norma Miller, member. My question is if the committee has considered other options for funding. I am curious because the line items listed here were designated for the organ maintenance. If those funds are gone, how will the maintenance be paid for?”

Juan stepped up to the pulpit and spoke without looking up from his papers. “We have considered all options, and these funds are the best option. We estimate that we can replenish the accounts within three years---well before the next scheduled maintenance.”

Then Juan stepped down from the pulpit never having looked Norma in the eyes. Norma couldn’t believe it. She had known Juan since he was an infant. She taught him in Sunday school. He was in youth group with Norma’s daughter. He would never have been disrespectful to her. Juan’s coldness made Norma even more determined.

“Can you let us know what other options you considered? Isn’t there money left over from the moving fund?”

Linda nodded at Juan as if giving him permission to answer the question. Juan walked back to the pulpit. “We considered the entire budget. We met for hours on end scouring each line. After a lot of debate, this is what we decided.” Then Juan stepped down from the pulpit, again, never looking at Norma.

“I appreciate the hard work you put into this Juan, especially with the new baby. I don’t know how you do it all. But I honestly wish you and the other committee members could explain why these lines were chosen over something like the fund for the columbarium mainten...”

“Norma, please give others a chance!” Linda interrupted. “I think Juan has said enough about the committee’s discernment.”

Linda was stone faced and her tone had a coldness Norma had never heard before from the pulpit. “Are there any other questions from the floor? Yes, Alma?”

“Thank you madame moderator. And thank you to the committee and Juan especially for all the time you have put into this. I just want to say, I don’t think people appreciate how difficult this move has been, and we are so fortunate for your taking care of us this whole time. And what a beautiful building we have now. It seems very ungrateful to question this group of people after all the blood, sweat and tears they have put in.”

“Thank you, Alma. I’m sure the committee appreciates that. Any other questions from the floor?”

The room fell silent. Norma never knew what it meant to be a pariah until this moment. It was as if everyone she loved and knew for decades suddenly became a stranger; strangers whose disdain for her was only thinly veiled. A fog of isolation settled in over her. She felt as if everyone could see her humiliation. The silence was excruciating and seemed to go on forever. “Well, then are we ready to vote?”

Someone stood up from the back and started to walk down the aisle toward the microphone. It was Melinda.

“Melinda Anderson, ruling elder.”

“Yes, Melinda? What is your question.” Linda’s voice betrayed her irritation.

“Well I was watching this process, and I am just wondering...this committee. What is the name of the committee that is putting this motion forward?”

“It’s the Relocation Task force,” Juan replied.

“Thank you, Juan.” Melinda words were full of warmth. She paused for a moment. It was the most remarkable moment, Norma thought. It was a pause that felt like a collective deep breath. It slowed the room down and drew everyone’s attention to the next thing that Melinda was going to say. All those who had been intently staring at the carpet looked up. Those who were impatiently waiting for the vote to happen relaxed. Even Juan started to make eye contact. Melinda continued with her next question, which was posed with refreshingly calm curiosity.

“If I remember correctly, the Relocation Task Force was formed to manage some of the emergency tasks around the flood recovery and the move?”

“That is correct,” Juan answered.

“And the task force was empowered to make certain decisions without Session approval?” Juan nodded in agreement. “Well, that made a lot of sense. We needed that at the time...I mean, during the crisis. But I wonder if we are still making decisions as if we are in a state of crisis.”

“Melinda, there is a motion on the floor,” Linda interjected. Her voice was jarring and urgent, a significant contrast from Melinda’s calm, thoughtful pace. She went on, oblivious that the energy in the room had shifted significantly. “Do you have a question or not? Some of us need to prepare for second service.”

“Yes, I have two questions and one concern. My first question is...well, I’m wondering if there was a written description of the purpose of the Task Force and when it’s function would be complete? My second question is whether the Task Force was required to report regularly to Session? And before anyone answers those questions, I’ll state my concern: I am concerned that the ‘crisis’ that we had put us all in a state of anxiety that has overridden our proper representative decision-making process. I would argue that the ‘crisis’ is over.” Melinda looked around at the congregation. “Session should be fully restored to its role as the church’s primary decision-making body. Thank you.”

The sound of the gavel pounding the pulpit reverberated through the microphones. “Your questions are noted, Melinda, however, none were pertinent to the motion on the floor. Therefore, we will not delay any longer. We have an issue to resolve. You may not want to resolve it, but others do. I would entertain a motion to call the question.” Linda looked intently at Alma, who stared blankly back at Linda, until, with a jump, she realized the signal had been given.

“I move that the question be called.” Norma didn’t recognize the voice of the person who seconded.

“All in favor, say ‘aye.’” A heavy contingency of voices called “aye” but not as robust as in the past. “All opposed, ‘nay.’” A lighter contingency called ‘nay,’ but their voices were marked by a new resiliency.

Norma inwardly smiled. Her sense of shame was lifted. She didn’t even care that the money for the organ would be spent. There was more oxygen in the room somehow. She looked for Melinda but couldn’t see her in the room of people coming and going.

Finding Resilience – the other side of the storm

By the time the mechanical shutters were installed, the week after Easter, the sun's path had returned to its southern arc and the glare was long gone. The church endured the glare for months and survived. And yet, in the meantime, another problem surfaced, one which couldn't be solved by shifting money around or researching materials or re-arranging the sanctuary layout. The new problem was relational.

Surprisingly, after the congregational meeting in which Melinda had created a moment of clarity with her calm intervention, tensions increased rather than decreased. Linda, sensing that her leadership was being questioned, re-connected with the congregants who were the most supportive of her. Feelings of distrust emerged. Groups formed. Animated conversations stopped when new people walked into the room. The locus of this tension seemed to originate with the Relocation Task Force. This was a group that had once had the full support and gratitude of the entire congregation. But now, it's distrust of the congregation had become palpable. The feeling was mutual.

Linda began to vent one evening as they waited for the rest of the Task Force members to arrive. "Melinda was polite and considerate. I'll give her that. But she is wrong for saying that the Task Force is trying to override the Session. You guys have worked hard and don't deserve to be accused of misconduct like that. The least she could do was talk to me privately before she broadcast her charges publicly."

"I didn't feel like she accused us of misconduct," Juan said sheepishly. Linda shot back, "Well, what do you think she meant by 'override our representative form of government,' huh? It sounds like PJC language to me!"

"She was one of those who voted to stay in the old building, right?"

"If we listened to those people, we'd still be drying out the pews."

"We just need to make sure we stick together, otherwise people like Melinda or Norma who want to interject their own ideas before we can finish will take over. They have no idea. We have worked so hard."

"I know! I just want to tell them, we are almost done...just be patient!"

The conversation continued until the last member arrived and the meeting could begin. After prayer, the minutes were accepted and then Juan, the chair, gave his report. "The Session has requested that we report regularly to them. I will attend their next meeting and present the timetable for the repayment of the organ maintenance fund and the status of the shutters. Any other items that we should report?"

The room fell silent. Alma finally spoke up. "Shouldn't we defend ourselves against what Melinda said? I mean, we aren't trying to override Session."

Linda consoled the group: “It is probably best left alone. We should just put our heads down, get the work done, and not worry about what others are saying about us. When you are about the work of the church, you should expect some criticism.”

“I don’t know Linda,” said Juan, “I think, in the long run, it’s better to keep the communication open. Maybe we should be listening to what the Session has to say. There are a lot of good ideas out there. And the main complaint wasn’t that we weren’t doing good work, it was that we weren’t letting people know what we were doing.”

“Juan you have no idea what you are talking about!” Linda unleashed her anger. “We just need to finish this project and that is it! There is no reason for them to interfere. I can’t believe you are taking their side!” She looked at him with visible distrust. The room was silenced. No one looked up from their notes.

“Well, then, if there is nothing else to report, then we can close the meeting.” With this, Juan stood up and walked out of the room.

Norma never made contact with Melinda after that congregational meeting to thank her for her courage and insight. It was as if she had disappeared into thin air. The next Sunday she saw her across the sanctuary but, once again, couldn’t get to her before church school began.



The following Sunday, Norma had to go up to the cabin to get it ready for winter. After that, the issue subsided and Norma thought she would set it aside for awhile. But after Christmas, she began to notice the tensions. People stopped talking suddenly, or began to whisper, when she walked in the room.

There were people who had been good friends, like Alma or Ed or Tom, who were now polite but distant towards her. Others wouldn’t look at her during worship. But this time, Norma noticed it wasn’t just she who was being ostracized, but several people. Frank and his wife Beverly sat by themselves during fellowship. Laurie and her daughter Abigale were friendly to Norma, but were ignored by others. Norma could see the church starting to splinter before her eyes. People were starting to leave, saying things were getting too political. Even Juan seemed to be shunned by Linda and her group. “I wonder what Melinda thinks about all this?” Norma decided to find her this Sunday and ask.

“Hey Melinda, wait up!” Melinda turned around to see Norma walking fast toward her. She smiled and walked back toward her. “Hello Norma, it’s nice to see you. We haven’t talked in months. How are you?”

“I’m doing just fine. Yes, we haven’t talked in ages. I wanted to thank you for what you said at the congregational meeting, but I just couldn’t get to you.”

“Well, I appreciate that. I had been thinking over the situation for a long time and thought it was a good time to talk about my concern.” Melinda was as calm as ever. “Norma, I wonder if you have noticed that people are tense at church lately?”

“Yes, I have. As a matter of fact, I wanted to ask you about it. What can we do?”

“Well, I don’t know if there is anything I can do about it. People are capable of deciding for themselves what is the right and wrong thing to do in any given situation. But, I think that we went through a difficult time as a community. It’s hard sometimes to get back to normal after such a difficult event. We lost a lot. I believe that I needed to grieve it all—you know, the loss of the building, the way things were, who we were before the flood. Sometimes I wonder if those who worked so hard to move the church have had the same chance to grieve.”

“But now,” she continued, “I feel like I’m emerging from that period of grief with some hope for the future. I’ve decided that whenever I interact with people, I’m going to treat everyone with respect and compassion, even if they seem angry at me for what I said. Now, mind you, I will also be clear in saying what I believe. But I will always say it with as much grace as I can muster.”

“I want to do that too, Melinda.” Norma didn’t know what else to say. There was nothing more to say. She found Melinda’s clear-mindedness very reassuring. It seemed as if Melinda knew who she was and what she believed. Standing next to her was like standing in the shade of a deeply rooted tree.

“We have a Session meeting tomorrow night. As a member of the congregation, you are free to attend. You aren’t allowed to speak, but you can observe. Maybe it would be a way to lend your support to the leadership---to let them know that you are aware of what is happening and that you are committed to this church.”

“Sure! Do you think Linda will be okay with it?”

Melinda laughed. “Well, I’m not sure that Linda will like it, but I am sure that Linda has to allow it.”

The Session meeting was held in the conference room. Norma had only been in that room twice. It seemed so intimidating with the large, glossy wooden table and the high back chairs. It looked more like a boardroom at a bank or a law firm. The Session used to meet in a musty room in the basement at the old building. This was much more impressive.

Linda avoided looking at Norma until the meeting was opened and the Clerk took roll. “I noticed that we have a guest this evening, but there is nothing on the agenda. May I ask why you are in attendance Norma?” Even when she was kind, Linda seemed to be angry. “I am just here as an observer.” (Melinda had told her to say that.) Linda turned and glared at Melinda who looked right back at her without a trace of hostility. “I encouraged Norma to attend as an observer. I think it’s good for members-at-large have the chance to see how Session works. It reminds us all that people really care about this church.”



“You can’t have privilege of the floor. We have a full agenda.”

“I understand. Thank you.” (Melinda told her to say that too.)

The meeting was pretty boring, Norma thought to herself. But she was still glad to be there. It felt good to be connected to everyone. Even if they were mad at her (like Linda). Being close helped her see that things were really alright. When she stayed distant from people, it seemed as if their anger was much more potent than it was up close.

Then Juan made his report about the Relocation Task Force. Norma watched Melinda who sat listening intently. Linda tried to move on to the next item on the agenda after Juan finished, but Melinda interrupted. “I’d like to ask Juan a question, please.”

“Ok, but let’s not spend a lot of time on this. We have a full agenda.”

“Juan, I am wondering how the Relocation Task Force defines its task. How will you know when you are done?” Juan started to answer but Linda overpowered him. “Melinda, we have been over this. The Task Force will be done when all of the projects are finalized.”

“Alright, Linda, what projects need to be finalized?”

“We don’t know yet. Some of the projects are still outstanding...some may be resolved but we won’t know until at least another year or so...”

This time Melinda was the one who spoke up. “Linda, I think these projects are not about the relocation but about ongoing maintenance of our current building. I think the relocation is complete. And, as such, the Task Force’s mandate has expired.”

“Melinda, you don’t know what you are talking about!” The threatening storm of Linda’s anger was emerging, but Melinda remained unmoved. “I am going to continue Linda.”

“I would like to make a motion that the Relocation Task Force be disbanded with appreciation for a job well done.” Norma’s heart was racing. Linda’s face was flushed bright red as her eyes darted around the room to see if there would be a second.

Choi spoke up. “I second the motion.” Linda, looked down and bit the inside of her lip. Finally, she looked up, “any discussion?”

“I’m not sure I’m allowed to speak,” Juan said haltingly, “...but, I would say that as chair of the Relocation Task Force, I agree. I think our work has been completed.”

“Of course you do,” Linda muttered under her breath. “Fine... all in favor?” “Aye!” “Any opposed...the motion carries.”

“I would like to make a second motion.” Melinda interjected before anyone could say anything. “I move that we hold a celebration luncheon on the last Sunday in May for the Relocation Task Force to celebrate all that they, and Linda, have accomplished.”

The celebration luncheon was a huge event. The congregation gushed over the job the Task Force had done. A beautiful hand carved cross was presented to Linda for her leadership and a memorial plaque with 1 Corinthians 15:58 etched in silver plate was presented to the Task Force members: *Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.*



It was also a highly emotional event. Both men and women teared up as they recounted their memories of the old building. They shared stories of the flood, how it had taken the town by surprise, how it had taken so much from them, and how it brought out the best in them. As the day went on, the barriers between people came tumbling down. People doubled over in laughter. Groups of threes and fours walked around the new church like it was their first time seeing it. They hugged each other. It was well after sunset when the last of them pulled out of the parking lot.

As they walked out of the office and locked up, Bert, Linda's husband, put his arm around her and kissed her on the head. "It was a good day, Linda. You should be proud of what you have done." She couldn't stop the tears from coming. "Yeah...it was a good day."

She was silent as they drove home in the dark. "What are you thinking about?" he asked. Smiling at him, she sighed. "I'm just wondering what my next church will be like."

Chaos Amidst the Calm: immigration scenario

First Presbyterian Church of Santa Ana was born in the 1980s as new suburbs began to sprout in the Sunbelt. The first pastor was an energetic young man who settled in a neighborhood and started ringing doorbells asking people if they attended church. Soon he had a group of 30 families who met regularly in a rented school auditorium. Next they purchased the property, built the sanctuary, then the education wing, and finally the offices. As the church grew, his sense of call began to change, and he became restless for a new challenge. Eventually, the church grew to a comfortable enough size that pastor number one decided it was time to move on.

First Pres's second pastor was not so young and not so energetic. But he was agreeable and delivered good sermons. The congregation neither grew nor declined under his tenure, and he is remembered as a "nice guy."

Then the infamous pastor number three arrived. Depending on who you talk to pastor number three was either a saint or a sinner. He was either "passionate" or "threatening." He was either "persecuted" or "bullying." The church split under his leadership and half of the original members started a new church a couple of miles away.

Pastor number four was known as "the charmer." He seemed to be just what they needed at the time. For years, with his gentle teasing and sense of humor, he had a way of diffusing tensions before they could build. His focus was keeping dissent at bay and keeping the ship on course. All was smooth sailing for most of his tenure with the exception of one key event.

One Sunday toward the end of pastor number four's tenure, a new family arrived. Something about the church clicked with the couple and they decided to come back. In short time the family became a part of the congregation: the father served a term on Session, the three kids attended the mid-week program, and the mother, who was a professor at the local university, would occasionally teach adult education. It seemed to be a perfect match and the church members felt blessed to have this new family in their midst.

The mother, who had always been interested in social issues, became involved in a local community group that provided legal defense for undocumented immigrants. As the politics heated up, she became convinced that the defense of immigrants' rights was a faith issue more than a civic one. She spoke regularly to groups around the area about the plight of immigrants and their legal issues, including to local churches. It was a controversial issue in the area and stirred up a lot of conflict in her department at the university. But the mother enjoyed the energy of the debate and the attention she was generating.

Filled with the conviction that immigrant's rights was a spiritual matter, she approached pastor number four and asked if she might speak to First Pres about this issue. Pastor number four was taken off guard by the request. He respected her credentials and her convictions, but her confrontational style worried him. Unbeknownst to her, he had smoothed over several conflicts that she had started with other church members, and he didn't know if he could continue to manage her. He both admired her and was intimidated by her. But deep within, pastor number four was afraid that he might be accused of trying to sideline a woman because what she had to say would offend people, and the thought horrified him. So he blurted out an invitation to her to preach. Even as the invitation came out of pastor number four's mouth, he felt unease. Before he knew it, she gladly accepted.

The Sunday arrived. As the mother walked up to the pulpit, most in the congregation were a little wary. The children from this family were sincerely loved. But the mother's "passion" came across as arrogance. She had risen in the male-dominated world of academia by being confrontational. And it was true that she rarely listened to opposing views and even chastised those who disagreed with her. At her best she was a fierce and courageous advocate for the marginalized. At her worst, she was abrasive and dismissive to anyone who thought differently.

What followed was a sermon titled "Welcoming the Stranger: A Mandate from God." Some heard it as having all the fire of a prophet while others heard the hard-heartedness of a Pharisee. The response in the pews was divided. Some were inwardly applauding, while others felt intense indignation. Members of the congregation who describe themselves as politically progressive thought "Finally! Here in *our* church someone is speaking the truth!" While those who described themselves as politically conservative felt shamed as un-Christian for their beliefs in law, order and due process.



Immediately, after one sermon, the political and social divide that had been so meticulously knit together through years of skillful avoidance came to the surface. During the fellowship hour people began to cluster in groups rather than their usual easy mingling from person to person. Some spoke in hushed tones and others avoided eye contact. Only the children ran from table to table, group to group.

One of those who felt indignation during the sermon was Barry. Barry had worked as a border patrol agent for 10 years. He loved his job because he loved law enforcement. Barry's own father had been an alcoholic who had wreaked havoc on the family. The chaos of his early life convinced Barry that rules and order and safety were critical for families to thrive and for countries to be safe. To Barry, there was nothing wrong with a border and protecting it against human smuggling, drug trade and criminal traffic was not a sin. Barry saw things that this "professor" would never see in her ivory tower. He knew what it looked like in real time when people paid their families' fortune to be smuggled across the border. It looked like human beings stuffed in the back of a van that sat for hours in the sun until someone fell over dead. It meant being raped and abandoned in the middle of nowhere with nothing. To call it "welcoming the stranger" was a fantasy, Barry thought. It's more like luring victims into the hands of criminals and turning a blind eye to a trade in death.

Barry thought the sermon was just more of the ignorant liberal manipulation that he heard on the news. He was sick of people using sad stories to justify criminal activity. There are a lot of sad stories out there, but that doesn't mean that we should just wring our hands while people break the law. "Sure," he thought, "it's fine to 'welcome strangers' but a lot of those 'strangers' were really, really bad guys. Do we have to close our eyes and welcome them too? The God I believe in would never mandate that."

Mary heard a totally different sermon, one that made her heart sing for the first time in church in years. Mary had immigrated with her family from Mexico when she was six years old. While her life had been relatively easy—both in Mexico and in the U.S., she saw so much poverty and despair at the social service agency where she worked that it was wearing on her soul. Mary knew there were people in the congregation who thought crossing the border illegally was a crime, but she spent her days hearing stories of how poverty and gang violence made a family desperate to flee. "The people in this congregation would do anything to protect and feed their own kids, but when other people did the same thing, they called it a crime." Though she had always loved her church, it seem so hypocritical to her that some of them could call themselves Christian and turn their backs on other human beings in such need.



But that wasn't what made Mary's heart sing. The truth was, Mary had noticed a change in the country over the last few years. The president called people who looked like her and like her family members "criminals, drug dealers, and rapists" and no one seemed to care, not even in her own church. For the first time in her life in the U.S. she was afraid and for the first time in this church she was feeling isolated. This morning, from the pulpit, someone referred to immigrants as human beings, no...not just human beings, but children of God. It made her sit up a little taller in the pew. "Yes," she thought, "The God I worship would absolutely mandate that we should welcome them!"

Barry's anger was simmering as he walked into the fellowship hall. He felt as if he had just been called a racist because he didn't believe what "Dr. High and Mighty" said. He had always respected the pastor, which made it feel like a betrayal that he had let that woman deliver the sermon. There were churches all over the place where they preached liberal social justice stuff all day long, and that was fine for them. But this church was different. This had been his home for so many years. Was this place going to change? Was the pressure to be politically correct going to drive him out of his own church?

He reached for a Styrofoam cup and grabbed the orange handle of the coffee pot. Behind him he could hear Mary talking to Berna. Her tone of voice told him what they were saying before he heard a word. "Jesus and his family were immigrants too..." Barry rolled his eyes and let out a sigh. He didn't intend to, it just came out. He knew Mary heard him, and he dreaded what came next.

"Did you say something, Barry?"

"I didn't say a thing, Mary."

"I think you did, Barry," she said with a sly smile. "I'm wondering what you have to say... What did you think of the sermon, Barry?"

Barry had always liked how Mary spoke her mind. He admired the way she stood up to some of the older men in the church. But now he felt backed into a corner. He knew this wasn't going to end well.

"I thought it was bullshit Mary. That's what I thought."

"Really? What exactly did you think was bullshit?"

"Come on Mary, you know what I mean." Barry was sincere. They had talked about the kinds of things families go through when they try to cross the border. He thought they both understood it in a way that others in the church didn't.

"No, I don't know what you mean, Barry. Tell me what you mean."

"I mean that the professor has no idea what the real world is like."

Mary looked intently at Barry who avoided her eyes. She knew she was challenging him, and that it probably wasn't going to end well, but she couldn't help herself. She could no longer repress the resentment she felt. Yes, Barry seemed to care

about people and he had a hard job, just like she did. But she saw through him too. She knew that even though they got along (and her kids thought he was the “funnest” Sunday school teacher ever) it was only because he thought she was different. She wasn’t like the poor brown people who crossed the border. He looked down on them...maybe he even thought they were less than human.

“I wonder if you know that your ‘real world’ is not the same ‘real world’ for everyone, Barry?”

“What are you talking about, Mary?” He was looking her in the eyes now. “You know as well as I do that there is a lot of bad stuff going on. You and I both know the kinds of people who he wants us to welcome.”

“Yes, Barry, I know the kinds of people he wants us to welcome. They are people just like me. Perhaps you don’t want to welcome me anymore?”

“Come on, Mary, don’t give me that! You know what I mean.”

“That is the problem, Barry. I do know what you mean. I haven’t always wanted to believe it but its becoming pretty clear lately.”

“See! Now that is the BULLSHIT I am talking about! Just because I won’t fall in line and agree with *her*, now I am a racist?”

Barry stormed out of the room. He didn’t even care if half the church just heard him swear and yell. (He did care that some of the kids heard it).

Mary watched as Barry headed toward the parking lot. Out on the lawn she saw Barry’s daughter who was laughing in the sun with a group of the church kids, all of them surrounding her two- year-old son, cheering him on as he took his first steps.

Waging Peace

As you read this narrative, where do you see elements of each of the four quadrants?

As he pulled into the parking lot at First Methbyterian, Francis hoped his attitude would turn around before he had to write his sermon. He knew he didn't have to make any definitive decisions about what to preach until Tuesday or Wednesday, when the bulletin would be due to Lyn, the church secretary. He also knew that Bill was going in for surgery at 11:00 a.m., that there were others probably in the hospital from over the weekend – who was in, he did not know, at least not yet – and the afternoon staff meeting needed some work for the agenda. There was plenty to do to keep his mind off having to write a sermon. The first sign of trouble was finding that Lyn was not at her desk.

“Uh-oh,” thought Francis, “I wonder where Lyn could be?”

He poked his head around the corner, toward where the staff coffee pot was located, and saw Lyn leaning against the counter with an empty cup in her hand, making no effort toward filling it. Francis also saw her tear-streaked face. “What’s wrong? Are you okay?” he asked.

“You have got to do something about that Tom,” Lyn choked out. “He is a hateful, hateful man.”

Tom Quinn, one of the church’s elders, was a large man with loud opinions. Standing a full six feet, four inches tall and weighing close to 300 pounds, Tom was a man of good wealth and great self-importance. Anyone who doubted either of these things had merely to ask him.

Tom had been a member of First Methbyterian his entire life. He had introduced himself to Francis by saying, “I was baptized here, married here, and one day will be buried here. You preachers come and go, but people like me make the church what it is. I was here long before you came, Francis, and I’ll be here long after you leave, so don’t you forget that.”

Francis was momentarily distracted as he thought about Tom, who Francis worried would use his considerable influence to make more than his secretary’s life miserable. “What happened this time?” Francis finally asked. “Did he call or has he already been here?”

“He called. He said to tell you not even to think about it and that if you do even think about it, he was going to withhold his pledge, which would mean the church wouldn’t make budget and I would lose my job. Francis, you know I need this job!”

Francis did not even have to ask what “it” was or why Tom was concerned about “it.” Francis seethed. He kept his anger hidden, as he thought a pastor should, but inside his heart was pounding, and he was having trouble thinking straight. “Who does Tom think he is? How dare he! I have half a mind to call him up and give him a piece of my mind!” But even as he felt the outrage within, Francis knew he would never make the call. He knew he would acquiesce. Lyn knew it, too.

“Tom is a classic bully. Just ignore him, and he will calm down.” Even as he spoke the words, Francis understood how hollow they rang, how cowardly they sounded. “Hey, changing the subject for a bit, is there anyone in the hospital I need to know about?” he asked.

“We got a message from Bev’s daughter. Bev is in University Center with pneumonia again. And Charlie fell and broke his hip. He’s in St. Mary’s. And, of course, you remember Bill goes in at 11, right?”

“I do, but thank you for the reminder. Hey, I think I am going to make the hospital calls first and then come get ready for staff meeting. If anyone needs me, just take a message and tell them I’ll be back before lunch.”

Francis knew that his sudden change of plans was an escape, but no one would criticize him for being a good pastor. In fact, everyone would think he was wonderful for prioritizing prayer and visitation over administration. Francis’s shoulders slouched, and his head hung low as he walked away from the church.

As he put the car in park and mentally prepared himself for the elders meeting, Francis glanced into his rearview mirror and glimpsed Tom walking across the church parking lot. It was all he could do not to think of Tom as his enemy, but Francis, vowing to obey his bishop's advice, thought to himself, "Love thy neighbor." And with a deep breath and extended exhalation, Francis said aloud to himself in the car, "The heart at peace."

Tom and Francis exchanged cordial pleasantries as they walked from the parking lot, passed the handicap spaces, and into the church via the side entrance. Walking alongside Tom, it felt to Francis like the doors were a million miles away.

As they walked, Francis sensed that Tom was forcing himself to be civil. They discussed how hot the weather was, and Tom made a joke about "but it's a dry heat." As the two men entered the parlor and beheld the conference table, Francis noted with mild surprise that the other elders were already present. The only seats available were two on the near end and one directly opposite on the far end. Each man hesitated for a moment, as clearly neither wanted to sit next to the other. With but a slight hesitation in his step, Tom made his way to the seat at the far end of the table. Francis felt relieved.

As was his custom, Francis began the meeting with a scripture reading, a brief devotional, and prayer. Following the perfunctory business of announcing a quorum and approving the minutes with minor corrections, Francis asked the elders if they approved the agenda as presented, which usually was also a perfunctory piece of business. Tom cleared his throat, "Excuse me, Francis, but I think we need to talk about Sunday."

Immediately Francis's nerves were at full attention, though outwardly he appeared calm. "Okay," he said, with just a bit of tension entering his voice, "we can add that to the agenda at the end, under new business. Are there any objections?" Hearing none, Francis ordered it to be so.

The meeting would later be likened to such events as the Hindenburg, Chernobyl, and the space shuttle *Discovery*. Upon reflection, Francis thought of the joke which ends, "Other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, how did you like the play?" It had been a mistake for Francis to place Tom's provocation at the end of the meeting, for it meant that the elephant in the room remained unnamed for 90 minutes as tension built. Ninety minutes. Ninety minutes of elders' breathing becoming shallower. Ninety minutes of elders' voices tightening, elevating in pitch ever so slightly but distinctly. Ninety minutes of elders' imagining the worst and allowing their fears to drive them to a state of pique or deep into the security of their shells.

Tom broke the silence. "We need to deal with our pastor not preaching the Bible."

"Now see here," shot back Francis, beginning to lose his composure.

Tom continued with an eerie placidness about him, as if circling his prey: "The Word is clear. I think we all agree on that. And what the Word says is quite different from what our pastor preached. I, for one, cannot abide being a leader of a church that does not teach and preach the Word!"

"That is enough out of you, Tom! If you want to have a Bible quoting contest, bring it on! But I am not going to sit here and be accused of not teaching and preaching the Word."

"Say what you want, Francis," Tom responded, his voice dripping with disdain, "we all heard your sermon. We know now what you really believe."

Sherlynn had clearly heard enough. Stepping in to the fray she said, "Tom, don't you mean to say 'Pastor Francis'? You do know he is still our pastor, right? I think showing a little respect is in order."

"Perhaps he is for now," sneered Tom, "but I'm just getting started."

Sherlynn remained steadfast in confronting her fellow elder: "Don't you mean 'we,' Tom? You said, 'I,' but I am sure you meant 'we.' *We* are just getting started. In fact, I think there is a lot more to say. I, for one, have lots for questions for our pastor. Pastor Francis, would you like to say anything in your defense?"

Francis's face was the color of a tomato: "This conversation is not 'just getting started,' it is over! Meeting adjourned!" And with these words, Francis stood, said a prayer so perfunctory as to make a middle school boy sound like a theologian, and stomped to his car.

Monday afternoon Tom and Mildred welcomed Celia and Judy into his home. Tom and Mildred lived in a two story Mediterranean-style home in the gated community of Tuscan Estates. The vaulted ceilings, porticos and marble flooring conveyed a sense of elegance, which was matched by Mildred's exquisite taste as a decorator. Celia and Judy both

commented on the way she was able to use a collection of Diana Madaras water colors to give warmth and life to the living room, which looked out upon the Catalina Mountains to the north.

Mildred asked them each if they wanted coffee and poured them Café Justo, the fair-trade coffee sold at the church, as she directed them each to a spot on the sofa. Celia and Judy had decided to drive over together, and each was curious about this invitation. While they knew and liked Tom and Mildred from church, neither Celia nor Judy was particularly close to them nor had they ever been in their home. The closest either of them could imagine to calling Tom and Mildred friends is the fact that the two ladies both served on the board of elders with Tom. They respected Tom, even if they both secretly considered him a bully, and were most intrigued by the mysterious invitation to coffee.

“Thank you both for coming over,” Tom began. “I have been meaning to have you over for a long time and something always seems to get in the way.”

Mildred sat quietly, a hint of pain pursed upon her lips.

“You are probably wondering why I invited you to coffee,” Tom continued.

“Well, yes,” responded Celia. “It did come as something of a surprise. I don’t remember us talking too much outside of the board meetings, and now here we are in your home.”

“Not that it is unwelcome,” interjected Judy. “We were both most delighted to be invited. You have a lovely home, Mildred.”

“Thank you so much,” responded Tom. “Mildred is mostly to praise for that. She has an impeccable eye for color and style.”

“So,” said Celia, “what’s on your mind, Tom? Might this have something to do with Pastor Francis?”

“Guilty as charged,” joked Tom, raising his hands as if surrendering to law enforcement. “You know that I have not always seen eye to eye with Francis, but I really do want what is best for the church. No hard feelings, of course. Francis seems like a nice enough guy, but we need a minister who isn’t swayed by ‘every wind of doctrine.’ As nice as Francis is, he isn’t really a very strong Bible scholar, and I think he’s letting the world dictate what he is going to believe, and, therefore, what he is going to preach and teach.”

“I am not sure I would go quite that far, Tom,” began Judy, “but I agree with you that Pastor Francis has been a little off lately with his sermons.”

“A little off? You mean ‘missing the mark,’ don’t you?” responded Tom, as Judy studied her hands in her lap.

“I see what you are saying, Tom,” said Celia. “But what are we supposed to do? If we run Pastor Francis off, where do we go from there? Do you remember the last time we had a church fight? It led to a split, and we lost one-third of our congregation!”

“No one is talking about running Francis off, at least not yet. In fact, the reason I called you here is so that we can brainstorm some ideas for helping Francis become a better pastor.”

Tom’s words, “at least not yet,” caused both women to react; Celia’s eyes widened slightly while Judy’s sharp, quick inhalation of breath was audible. Yet when Tom professed to wanting to help Pastor Francis, Judy visibly relaxed, seemingly content that this conversation was not really subversive.

“Well, what did you have in mind?” asked Celia, who continued to search Tom’s face as if a bit leery of his motives.

Tom leaned into the conversation with practiced fluidity and feigned placidness, patiently probing for opportunities to co-op Celia and Judy. Finally, Tom saw the moment he was waiting for. “You know I like your idea about getting people who are close to Francis to come alongside him and coach him toward what the rest of the congregation believes.”

“But how would we do this,” asked Judy. “Do you know who the people are who are closest to Pastor Francis?”

“I thought you two were closest to Francis.”

“Us? Why no, I don’t think so,” wondered Judy. “Do you really think so?”

“I only know what I see in the board of elders’ meetings. He seems to like and respect you both quite a bit. I think if you could talk to people and help them understand that what is best for our church is for Francis to return to preaching the Bible, people will listen to you.”

“I’m not sure I have that much influence, Tom,” confessed a flattered Judy, warming to the idea.

“Oh, but you do. People know that you have Francis’s best interests at heart. Folks trust you to do what is best for the church. If you were to ask around, you’ll find there are a lot of folks who share your concerns.”

“So, Tom,” interrupted Celia, “what did you have in mind? Specifically.”

“I thought you two could write a letter, perhaps an open letter, and ask people to sign it. If enough people signed the letter, Francis would have to change his views.”

“I am not so sure about that,” responded Celia. “You know Francis: perhaps he will, perhaps he won’t. Either way, we’ll get our church back,” she added, having clearly come around to what Tom was suggesting.

“I am so tickled to hear you say that,” said Tom, smiling at them both but making knowing eye contact with Celia. He knew that she knew what needed to be done.

Throughout this conversation, Mildred remained silent.

Celia wrote the letter and had Judy sign it first and then, underneath Judy’s signature, Celia penned her own name. The letter was velvet steel, kind on the outside with a hard edge underneath. “Are you sure we are doing the right thing?” asked Judy.

“Judy, you know what people are talking about. If someone doesn’t do something soon, our church is going to split. You don’t want our church to split, do you Judy?”

“Of course I don’t. I just wish there was some other way. I so like Pastor Francis.”

“I like him, too, Judy, and we are doing this for Francis. He probably doesn’t know the kinds of things people are saying. We are just warning him so that he doesn’t get himself in trouble. Besides, it is the Lord we need to worry about, even more than Francis.”

“Of course, dear, I know that. And I love the Lord, too.”

On Wednesday morning at the Women’s Association Executive Committee, Celia mentioned the possibility of writing a letter. “I think someone should do something,” opined Celia, “and I am willing to take the first step, for the peace, unity and purity of our church, of course.”

“Of course,” agreed Betty, “but what would a first step look like?”

“Well,” Celia pretended to ponder, “perhaps I could write a letter of concern and ask Francis for a meeting. Better yet, why don’t I ask Judy to help me write the letter.”

Everyone agreed that asking Judy to help was a good idea, as she was universally well-liked and respected. That Celia and Judy both served on the board of elders made it make sense to everyone that they should write the letter. In truth, each woman on the executive committee was relieved not to have to confront Pastor Francis.

“After Judy and I write a letter, we could send it to all of you for your endorsement.”

“This almost sounds like we are starting a petition against Pastor Francis,” worried Sonya. “I wouldn’t want to cause him too much trouble.”

“Well better this than having the church split over politics,” replied Celia, shutting the door on Sonya’s argument. “Besides, it won’t be so much a petition as an open letter to express our concern and request a meeting. Really all we want is a chance to talk some sense into Francis. After all, we all remember 12 years ago.”

The memory of the last church strife was vivid in everyone’s minds. After months of rancor, the pastor had been fired, worship attendance had declined as people who liked the pastor had left to attend other churches or no church at all, and the emotional scar from those years remained. Fear and dread pervaded the room. No one wanted a repeat of schism.

On Wednesday evening, Celia emailed the letter as an attachment to the women of the executive committee. In the note in the body of the email Celia wrote a note, “Please don’t forget to let other folks know of our prayerful concern” and signed it with a smiley face.

By Saturday morning, 42 members had responded to Celia affirming their intent to send the “open letter.”

On Sunday morning, Francis opened Celia’s letter. It was 6:32 a.m.

Later that same morning, Judy wiggled around in her pew, trying to get comfortable. She hadn’t slept well the previous night. She held her breath as Pastor Francis opened his mouth.

It was Thursday afternoon before Francis could arrange a time to meet Judy for coffee. He had pondered whether or not to invite himself to her home, ask her to come to his office, or meet in a neutral location. He eventually decided on his office.

After making small talk, which was exceedingly awkward for both of them, while getting them both a cup of coffee, decaf for Judy, Francis finally directed the conversation toward the obvious reason why they were meeting. “Judy, I need to talk to you about your letter.”

At the mention of the letter, Judy’s neck began to flush slightly, a sure sign of her discomfort. She looked down and away for a moment, and when she raised her eyes they seemed to fall upon the photo of Francis, Claire, and their children. “I see you are admiring what is perhaps my favorite picture we have ever taken as a family,” said Francis.

Judy smiled, nodded, and said, “Oh, yes, Pastor, you have such a nice family. I just love your wife and those darling children of yours.”

“Thank you, Judy,” said Francis, “that is very kind of you to say. Now about your letter . . .”

“Oh I am so sorry about that letter. I should never have had anything to do with it! And it’s not really *my* letter, per se, but lots of people’s letter.”

“But you were the primary author, correct?” Francis asked, smiling and taking a sip from his coffee. “At least your name was listed first on the signature line. Is there something you’d like to tell me about how the letter came to be?”

Judy was flustered in the extreme and looked down at her hands, which had begun to fidget. “I, I, I’m not sure what to say really. I do so love this church, and I love you, too, Pastor. It’s just that you’ve started to preach about things that make me uncomfortable. I want my old church back. I want everyone to agree with everyone else and sing songs we all like. I . . . it’s just . . . I’m not sure I agree with you about what the Bible says.”

“Tell me more about that, Judy. What part of what I am saying is most disagreeable to you?” Francis asked this question with a gentleness of tone that seemed to convey that he was at peace with whatever answer she might give in response. This tone seemed to surprise Judy, as she herself appeared very tense. Yet Francis’s tone had an inviting presence to it, as if he really wanted her to tell him all of her concerns.

“I’m an old lady, you know that, Pastor Francis, and I just don’t think I can change the way I think about things.”

“And you find my messages seem to be asking you to think in a new way?” Francis coaxed.

“Yes, yes I do.” With Francis’s seeming to encourage her to speak her mind, Judy sat a little higher in her chair. A look of relaxed freedom seemed to shine through her. Beginning to say what she deeply felt and most fervently believed, Judy began to share with her pastor with an uncommon openness. Several times Judy remarked, “I know I should let you get a word in,” but still she talked. To Francis, Judy looked as if she had been liberated.

Finally, after a spasm of sharing at a depth that surprised even Judy, she said, “So when Celia asked if I wanted to co-sign her letter, it just seemed like a good idea. I had no idea that it would cause such a ruckus.”

Francis noted that, as he had suspected, Celia, and not Judy, was the primary author of the letter, and he still suspected that Tom was the voice behind it all. Yet Francis knew that he could not concern himself with Tom or Celia at the moment, for he had a wounded soul before him: a woman of great faith, deep compassion and tender heart, who, though not completely innocent, had been manipulated into playing a game for which she was hardly prepared. Francis noted, also, that it was now the moment for him to “self-differentiate,” to “be and express who he is” in the words of his bishop. Although Francis had been providentially calm while he listened to Judy, a calm for which he silently gave thanks to God for giving him, he now felt the familiar tightening of his neck, shoulders, and throat, a sure sign of his growing anxiety.

Taking a deep, soothing breath, Francis smiled warmly at Judy, “Thank you, Judy, for sharing all this with me. I feel as if I should take my shoes off, for my office has become sacred ground.” At these words, Judy blushed but seemed pleased.

Wanting to acknowledge that he had heard Judy deeply, Francis continued, trying to use his best active listening tools, “I respect that you feel as if you are losing a bit of your church and that things don’t feel the same. I honor that this must be terribly difficult and more than a bit uncomfortable.”

“Yes, it has been.”

Wanting to acknowledge the gap between her relatively benign motives and the relatively harsh method of writing a congregation-wide letter, Francis continued without allowing an edge to enter his voice, “Yet I feel as if writing a letter and having 40 or 50 members sign it felt to me like an attack, and this makes me curious because it doesn’t seem as if you wanted to attack me.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to attack you, Pastor. I’m so sorry.”

“Please, you don’t have to apologize, Judy, but it is helpful to me knowing how the letter came to be, that much of it was Celia’s idea.”

“Oh, it was, but I don’t want Celia to get in trouble, either.”

“No one is going to get in trouble, Judy. But if you are willing, I’d like to share with you my own heart. You have been so generous in sharing your heart with me, would you be willing to listen as I share mine with you?”

It was the first time a pastor had ever asked Judy to sit in the sacred space of listening as he or she spoke from the depth of their own heart. It was, for Judy, a transformational moment.

Maria and Judy sat across from one another enjoying their salads. It had been a while since either of them had gone to lunch after church. As their entrees arrived, Maria decided it was time to take the plunge. “Judy, I think you know why I invited you to lunch.”

Before Maria finished her words, she noticed the flush in Judy’s cheeks and presumed her new friend felt embarrassment at having hurt her pastor. Maria was not surprised when Judy jumped to interrupt, “I am so sorry. I never should have let Tom and Celia convince me to have anything to do with that letter.”

Maria noted with interest both how quickly Judy was to apologize as well as how quickly she was willing to throw Tom and Celia under the bus for their part in writing the letter. Setting these observations aside, Maria interjected, “Please, Judy, there is no need to be sorry. What happened is over. What I would like to discuss is what we can do about it.”

Judy’s brow furled. “What do you mean what *we* can do about it? Isn’t that Pastor Francis’s job? I am so, so sorry to have had a hand in creating this mess for him to clean up, but what can we do?”

“Well, we *are* both elders who sit on the board. Isn’t it our job to be the spiritual leadership of the church?”

“I suppose,” admitted Judy, “but I have always thought of our job as making sure we have a strong Sunday School for the children and passing budgets and those sorts of things.”

“Of course, each of these things is important, but our theology says that we believe in the priesthood of all believers and our polity elevates the role of elders for their spiritual care of the congregation. My understanding of this belief is that we, along with Pastor Francis, are responsible for the spiritual care of the congregation.”

“Yes, I agree, but how do we do that without creating controversy?”

Judy and Maria both pondered this question silently for a time, each taking the opportunity to take a few more bites of their lunch. Finally, Maria said, “In our polity, in the section about historic principles of the Church, it says that God alone is Lord of the conscience, and that faithful, intelligent Christians will sometimes disagree.”

“Is that ever true,” agreed Judy.

“It goes on to say,” continued Maria, “that because of our tendencies toward disagreement it is vital to show mutual forbearance and respect toward one another. So I guess the question is how can we show each other mutual forbearance and respect?”

Both women returned to their meals and pondered an answer to Maria’s question. Finally, Judy looked across the table. “It occurs to me, Maria, that I think questions, if asked with humility and a desire to hear and understand the response we give, can lead us toward a kind of respectful spirituality. Or, better yet, call it a spirituality of respect.”

“I *love* that phrase: the spirituality of respect. I think we are on to something, Judy, I really do. The phrase suggests that respect isn’t just something we do to play nice and to be civil but is a part of our faith.”

“But how do we get people on board with us? I mean, I love that we are having this great lunch but what happens tomorrow and the day after and the day after that? Won’t our friends find it a bit strange when we start to honor the best in each other’s arguments as well as own up to the worst in our own arguments? And what happens when you ask me a thoughtful, respectful question, and Tom jumps in with his bluster?”

At the mention of Tom, both women sighed and Judy rolled her eyes. “You know, I hate to say something like this right after we’ve been talking about the spirituality of respect, but I really am not fond of Tom. He’s something of a bully.”

“Agreed,” sighed Maria.

“Yet, in a perverse way, I think I try to placate him, even seek his approval. What’s wrong with me?”

Francis suspected that his sermon would not have been received well by Tom. There was nothing intrinsically controversial in what he had preached, yet the dynamics of the church’s family system were such that acknowledgment of any sort of disagreement among the wider congregation was sure to trigger an emotional reaction. Francis was determined not to dance this particular dance with Tom.

Or, better yet, to dance to a different tune.

Upon seeing Tom and Mildred head toward the side exit to the sanctuary, Francis carved his way through the various conversations of small groups of parishioners until he had an angle on their path. Intercepting them just in front of the coffee pot, Francis extended his hand to them both, “Tom and Mildred, it is good to see you. Mildred, I understand your sister in California was in the hospital this week. How is she doing?”

“Why, yes, Pastor, thank you for asking. Kimberly had a heart issue. She had two stints put in but is doing fine now. The doctors think she will be released today.”

“I am so glad to hear it. We will keep her on the prayer chain until she is 100%. And Tom, how are you today?”

“I’m fine, thank you.”

Mildred pursed her lips and spoke sternly to her husband, “Now, Tom, you be nice. Pastor is trying to extend an olive branch here. You’re a Christian. You know you should forgive others, especially your pastor.”

Francis looked kindly toward Mildred and spoke to her gently, “Mildred, although I appreciate your words, I am okay with Tom speaking his mind so long as he does so with respect.” Then, looking toward Tom, Francis continued, “Tom, I understand that you may not be ready to talk to me about some of our recent disagreements. It is often the case that men such as ourselves like to be right, like to win, and usually think we know best. Our kind of disagreement is common. And I actually am not looking for us to agree with one another; in fact, I prefer to suggest that our trying to agree with one another is a bad thing.”

Of all the things Francis could have spoken to Tom, the notion that Francis was okay with a lingering disagreement was the last thing Tom expected to hear. Flabbergasted, Tom responded, “Excuse me? You’re okay with us disagreeing? We’re just supposed to argue with one another forever? What kind of church is that?”

Tom’s frustration with Francis was beginning to boil over. Mildred sensed it and attempted to stave off a public confrontation. “Tom, honey, remember we’re in church. Please don’t say anything you’ll regret.”

“Mildred, enough! And Francis, enough out of you, too!” Tom leaned in toward Francis and lowered his voice to an angry whisper, “If you think I am going to let you make this into some kind of hippie church, you don’t know who you’re dealing with!”

Turning to Mildred, Francis added, “I will keep your sister in prayer.” And after giving her a hug, Francis walked away.

As the elders entered the conference room to take their seats for their monthly board meeting, Francis took the temperature of the room. He noticed immediately which elders greeted him with eye contact and which elders avoided his gaze. He was fascinated by where each elder chose to sit and searched for any clues as to the presence or absence of factions. He was not surprised to see Tom enter the room last: “The grand entrance of the one who would be king,” thought Francis with a bemused smile.

Francis had created the agenda so that the first issue listed following the opening prayer and devotional time, and the approval of minutes, was his “Pastor’s Report.” Francis began by talking about the conference in Phoenix and some of the workshops he had attended. Without going too deep into the details, Francis indicated that he thought some of the workshop material would be good for the entire board of elders to discuss.

Tom interrupted Francis, “I’m not sure I want to talk about any of this, Francis.”

“Excuse me, Tom,” interrupted Judy. “I prefer you address our pastor with the title of respect which his office deserves.”

Ordinarily, Francis’s knee-jerk response would have been apologetic or enabling, something like, “Oh, Judy, that’s okay. I don’t mind.” But Francis saw the surprised look on Tom’s face. Never before had anyone challenged him in a board of elders’ meeting. Ordinarily, Tom’s knee-jerk response to being challenged would have been a fierce rebuke, a raised voice or a sharp word. Yet clearly even Tom could not find the nerve to offer such a word to one as gentle and kind as Judy. He simply had no words.

Francis, noticing Tom’s response, allowed himself a moment’s reflection: What was wrong with insisting that other’s use his title? If such use was so that *Francis* could feel better, in order to feed his ego or salve his self-doubt, then insisting that others use his title would be perpetuating his own dysfunctional sense of self. But this was not Judy’s purpose. Rather, Judy was leaning into civility; her insistence was that the office of pastor be respected and, by extension, the office of elder and, ultimately, the gathering of those who were all baptized into the oneness of Christ.

Francis merely looked at Judy and said, “Thank you.”

“As I was saying,” continued Francis, “I would like us to plan a retreat day, an opportunity for us to discuss, discern, and decide how we are going to be together as a faith community. In the Roman Catholic part of the Church this is called a ‘Rule of Life.’ For us Protestants, we might think about it in terms of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s famous underground seminary in Germany during the 1930s, which led to his writing the book *Life Together*.”

“What would we do on this retreat, though? Would we have to read *Life Together*?” asked Jeff, the stewardship chair who was great with numbers but allergic to reading.

“I hope we don’t have to talk politics,” lamented Pricilla, the Sunday School chairperson.

By this point, Tom had found his voice again: “This is nonsense!”

“Tommmm.” It was Judy who spoke this word, in a tone that was soft yet somehow guttural.

Judy’s word again had a chilling effect on Tom, and Francis seized the opportunity to talk about the possibilities for their “Life Together” retreat. “We most certainly will not want to be talking about politics, but as for reading Bonhoeffer’s book, we can do that as an elder board or not. What is really important is to discuss how *we* are going to live *our* life together.”

“So what you’re talking about is more like a class behavior covenant we have our teachers make with their classes at the beginning of the year,” chimed in Pricilla.

“Something like that. And the list of topics we can talk about is almost endless, not that the retreat will be like that, but think about it: We might want to talk about conflict and reconciliation in the Bible or our own sense of how each of us deals with conflict as an individual.”

“I avoid conflict like the plague,” admitted Pricilla.

“I’ve recently learned to embrace it,” shared Judy with some pride.

“How can you do that?” asked Pricilla, truly astounded at the possibility.

“Well, I have long sought to avoid conflict because I didn’t want to deal with all the tension and strife associated with it. But I have recently come to realize that, by avoiding conflict, the tension and strife just remain. The conflict itself may go underground, but it’s still there, always waiting to strike. I just decided enough is enough.”

The elders were warming to the idea of a Life Together retreat, with several elders commenting that such a skills development day would help them not only at church but also in their homes and work. Yet Francis knew that developing personal communication skills, though helpful, even essential, would be insufficient to set the congregation on a path toward becoming the kind of faith community that could engage difficult issues without fracturing.

“Folks, this is all well and good, and I am glad you seem responsive to the idea of a Life Together retreat, but we are also going to need to talk about some hard things—such as how to talk about hard things.”

“Don’t we vote on things? Isn’t that our way?” asked Marshall.

“Sure, when we have to make a decision, we have to vote. But what divides congregations is, often, not conducive to taking a vote: values, beliefs, and principles; emotions and perceptions of right and wrong. These are not things you can really take a vote on, yet we need to learn how to talk about them in ways that honor God, honor one another, and also honor our own beliefs.”

“And that is what is wrong with you Francis!” Tom had re-engaged in the meeting. With a vengeance.

“Tom, do you have something constructive to add to our conversation?” The gathered elders were impressed by how Francis seemed to be holding his composure in the face of Tom’s outburst. Inwardly, Francis was reminding himself to breathe slowly and release the tension his body was experiencing from the sudden release of adrenaline.

“I sure do! I have had enough of your kum bah yah, *Pastor*.” The note of sarcasm in Tom’s voice when he said the word “pastor” was evident. Several elders objected at once to Tom’s tone, but as they spoke simultaneously their words were difficult to understand. Francis held up his hand to his elders, and said, “Folks, please, one at a time.”

The gathered elders remained silent; all were watching their pastor, their leader, to see what cues he would give them. Tom, too, was watching Francis, but appeared angry. Francis slowed his breathing and looked around the room, appearing calm.

Inwardly, Francis was anything but fine, yet he somehow knew he was going to be okay. The Spirit nudge was not exactly peace he was feeling, but he was feeling empowered. He sensed he could handle this conversation. “Tom, it would help me if you could be more specific. Can you tell me more about your concerns, please?”

These words, which sounded calm and reasonable to the other elders, infuriated Tom, “More specific? You want me to be more specific?”

“Yes, Tom, I do. I would also prefer that you lower your volume a bit. It is difficult to carry on a respectful discussion when one or both parties are raising their voices.”

Tom raised his lumbering body from the table, his large frame casting a shadow over one side of the room, his entire being casting a shadow over the rest of it. “Francis,” Tom began in a subdued voice, one which was unfamiliar to the other elders and oddly discomfiting, as they were more accustomed to Tom’s belligerence. “I do not believe I can serve on this board if you are the pastor. Either you must leave or I must leave. Our differences are too great. As it is evident that this board has no intention of asking you to resign or of firing you, I must tender my resignation.”

It was now Francis’s turn to look down at the papers before him, even as every elder in the room looked at him. When Francis raised his head, he looked at Tom with a mixture of relief and resolve. Relief because a thorn in his flesh had just offered to resign, and there was a part of Francis who, even in that moment, was thinking, “Addition by subtraction.” Yet resolve also because Francis had made a commitment to God, to himself, and to his church to be as good a shepherd as he had the ability to be, and a shepherd does not abandon his sheep. Yet Francis knew that it was a fine line he must walk: between judgment and mercy. Too much of either would set an unhealthy course for the journey on which he and his elders were embarking.

“Tom, you are my parishioner, my adversary, but the deepest truth is you are my brother. I would prefer that you stay so that together, as a community, as elders, we can figure these things out. But I know that only you can make that choice. But if you do make the choice to stay, please know that it is a choice to seek a common mind and a common heart, to wage peace together in order to find a unity that only Jesus can bring. Please choose with care.”

Tom left the room not saying a word.

Where do you see elements of each of the four quadrants?

Quad 1: The Bomb

Quad 2: The Loop

Quad 3: The Pause

Quad 4: The New Normal

