GETTING DOWN TO CASES

Herbert Anderson

Reconciliation as Widening the Circle

Britta and Eliot Marney had determined during their courtship that they would have four children. It was therefore a profound disappointment when they learned, after four years of trying, that they could not have children of their own. They immediately applied for adoption with an agency that specialized in open adoptions. In fully open adoptions, the adoptive parents meet the birth parents, share full identifying information, and plan to engage in ongoing contact over the years. Britta was in the delivery room when the child they were to adopt was born. The birth mother had left an abusive home at an early age and was making a living as an exotic dancer. She enjoyed her life and was pretty sure she did not ever want to be a parent. Because their contact was so positive around Eleanor's birth, Britta and Eliot asked that the birth mother stand with the parents and sponsors at her baptism. The Marneys saw this as one way to ensure ongoing contact between Eleanor Marie and her birth mother.

Fred and Marlene Graham had been married for sixteen years when Fred announced that he was leaving their marriage and his faculty job in order to live with his gay lover Mark Grimes. Marlene was not surprised and a little relieved at the end of an unhappy marriage, but their three daughters were enraged by their father's actions. Fred and Mark lived together only three years before Fred was diagnosed with AIDS. The disease was particularly virulent and Fred's health declined rapidly. During the last months of Fred's life, Mark was not only his constant companion but also his only caregiver. After he died, Fred's parents and his ex-wife planned the funeral. Mark had no place among the mourners.

Carl and Joanne met in high school. During some of his teenage years, Carl had actually lived as a boarder in Joanne's home. For half of their twenty-seven years of marriage, Joanne had been an invalid because of a painful, degenerative disease. Five years after Joanne's death, Carl met Rebecca, a widow with a teenage daughter. When they decided to marry, Rebecca insisted that Joanne's brothers and sisters, who lived in the same community, were not to be invited to the wedding. She wanted them to have a fresh beginning to their marriage without residues from the past. Carl was troubled by her demand and sought the counsel of the priest who would preside at their wedding. As a result of that conversation, Carl decided to postpone the wedding until he and Rebecca could resolve their differences.

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Each of these stories raises questions about who is to be included and who may be excluded from rituals of the Church when those rituals are also significant moments in a family history. Most of us can tell stories of hidden or open conflict about who shall sit with whom at weddings and funerals, or how to plan an ordination when parents are divorced, or who can and cannot be invited to a baptism or a wedding. For example, should any grandparents of a child be excluded from that child's first communion because the child's parents are no longer married? Should the mother of the bride be able to insist that her ex-husband's new wife cannot attend his daughter's wedding? Should weddings be performed in the church if the invitations exclude the presence of children? In all these questions, the underlying issue is this: when ritual moments are also an emotionally charged family affair, how can the ministry of the Church insist that ritual planning be governed by principles of reconciliation that regularly widen the circle? Our ministry with people at significant ritual transitions is complex: we need to honor emotions and challenge behavior at the same time.

There are times, of course, when the family wishes to widen the circle and the Church is the limiting agent. Weddings in which only a few participants are free to commune become painful signs of division in Christ's Church. When parents are not able to share in their child's first communion because a previous marriage was not annulled, the circle is narrowed. Presumably, the request of Britta and Eliot would be honored on pastoral grounds because there are no sacramental reasons to exclude Eleanor's birth mother from the circle at baptism. By participating in an open adoption process, the Marneys were acting from another fundamental faith conviction: that marriage is a public more than a private reality. A marriage commitment not only affirms that two people have chosen to love and cherish one another, it is a pledge to make it possible for each one separately and together to love and cherish the world.

In their desire to include the birth mother in the baptism, the Marneys also sought to give the birth parent pride rather than shame. The birth parents are included as agents of love even though they have relinquished the primary care of a child to others. The daughter of a friend wrote this after her third open adoption:

> I believe fully open adoption makes me a more compassionate person. It teaches me that while adoptive parents give children the reality of parenting and nurturing, birth parents give them the reality of birth and heritage. One cannot take the other's place. Each parent is real in a unique way, not better or worse, and we should be proud of the role we can play in our children's lives. . . . Through these children, God reminds us of our commitment to love and cherish the world in which we live. Children are God's miracle.

> Whether we give birth to our children or adopt them, love for our children ought to include a commitment not to cut them off from the people who partly represent their past and future.

RECONCILIATION WIDENS THE CIRCLE OF LOVE

The omission of Mark Grimes from the circle of mourners was a decision made in an emotionally charged moment. Since there had been no reconciliation with Mark before the funeral, the complexity of grief for Fred's death would have made it difficult to include him among the mourners. Again we confront a tension between the limits that grief sets on our ability to widen the circle and the demands of Christian faithfulness that would discourage us from excluding anyone, including unacceptable mourners, from the ritual circle of grief. Because Mark was excluded from the mourners, only a portion of Fred's life could be marked at the ritual. When family or friends or lovers are excluded from any significant church ritual, prior reconciliation may be necessary in order to widen the circle.

Reconciliation, by definition, is never easy. Conflicts that divide are often old and emotionally loaded. Sometimes the people being excluded are only tangentially related to the originating conflict. Individuals may not even know why they are not to speak to others in the family, but they do know clearly who will be offended by transgressing old barriers. At other times, the people we regard as responsible for pain incurred in our lives are inescapably present. Such reconciliation cannot be hurried. Even our best rituals cannot eliminate conflict or remove hurt overnight. It takes a very long time to make room in our world for people we believe have offended us. Sometimes, however, ritual moments like weddings and funerals become face-saving occasions to begin a process of reconciliation. Family members who have not spoken to one another for years meet on the common ground of the baptism of the first great-grandchild in the family and the enmity is broken.

The tension between a public and a private view of marriage is one of the issues that surfaced in Carl and Joanne's wedding plans. If a wedding is a public declaration in the presence of God and others that two people intend to become married, then the significant "publics" of our lives need to be included in that declaration. Second marriages that begin with an intent to eliminate past connections to family and friends inhibit the new future couple's intent and narrow the circles of support that might undergird the difficult task of becoming married. The irony of life and faith is also true of marriage: we strengthen our private bonds when we enlarge the public arenas.

Ministry with people when the absence of reconciliation may interfere with the celebration of a significant ritual moment in human life

must be done with compassion and finesse. Sometimes we are reluctant to challenge deep-seeded enmity in families and between people because we do not believe anything can be done to change things. Sometimes we are so fearful of renewing old hurts or inflicting new ones that we do not even name the absence of reconciliation. Even so, it is our moral obligation, as Robert Schreiter has reminded us, to make spaces of safety, memory, and hope that help make reconciliation possible. We may not need to attend to that task even when we are preparing people for rituals of transition in which family and faith intersect. When we do, we enhance the possibility of linking human stories with the divine narrative in the rituals of life and faith.

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