

“Teach me, O Lord, the way to live,
love, and serve; and I will obey to the end.” AMEN!

Tobias, was the village stone mason.

He was quick and efficient.

If you wanted a beautiful wall, built quickly,
he was your man.

His secret was that when he found stones
that were mismatched he'd force them to fit.

He'd chisel here and shave edges there and
then beat the stone into position.

Gabriella, his apprentice was slower.

Her work was beautiful but the time it took her
to complete the projects was frustrating to Tobias.

Her pace was the deciding factor for Tobias.

“Your work takes too long!” He'd complain.

The town council called upon Tobias and Gabriella
to build an important wall that would
protect the river bank from erosion.

Tobias went to work and as usual forced stone after stone into obedience.

Gabriella watched him and privately spoke to him,

“Master, these stones you’ve placed together are fighting one another.”

Tobias grunted without looking up and said,

“They’re fine. They’ll hold.”

Gabriella said, “They are holding because your pushing them together, but

when you step away, they’ll push each other apart.”

Tobias ignored her and kept working at break-neck speed.

He finished the wall weeks before the rains came and slept the deep sleep of one who’d conquered stone and finished ahead of schedule.

Weeks later, Tobias woke to loud shouts.

The wall had cracked down the center and

half slid into the river, when the rains came.

The villagers ran with sandbags and
Tobias joined their work.

After, it was temporarily repaired with sandbags,
he looked at the ruined wall and noticed
what Gabriella had seen.

Each stone that had been bullied into position
had scars and cracks because they had not
been resting together but straining
against one another.

Stone on stone pushing against each other
until the rains gave them permission to
do what they'd wanted to do all along...
be strong but at peace.

The next morning, the elders gathered
and called Tobias into the meeting space.

They did not shout.

They did what the old teaching said to do:
that is, if someone does something against you,
go to them and them alone.

The eldest woman Hannah spoke first.

Without accusation she named why they were there.

“Tobias, we have heard the wall, and
we have heard the stones, and
we have heard Gabriella.

We have found conflict between you and the work.

Can we look at this with you?

This quiet first step was without shame.

It was not a trial.

It was a process of voices speaking honestly and
the practice of deep listening.

Conflict honored enough to be named in person
was conflict already half-healed.

Tobias wanted to defend himself, at first.

Not every wall he'd built collapsed.

His long career was not one failure after another,
but Hannah was not inquiring about his calling
nor did she question the value of his career.

She was asking about this wall, this offense, this fault.

And it was being asked face to face
which is a difficult kind of kindness.

So Tobias told the truth.

“I forced them.

I pushed too hard and forced the stones to fit
where I wanted them to fit, and then I moved on.”

The question “why?” Didn’t need to be asked.

The silence was allowed to do the asking of why.

Tobias then said, “I did it that way because
slower felt like failing.”

To which the wise Hannah said,

“So, it is not a problem between you and
the stones, then is it?

A person at war within themselves cannot
build something that will endure.

And here, at the heart of it, is the truth.

Conflict is not the problem.

Ignoring the conflict, that is the problem. (Pause)

Decades later, when Gabriella, now the town's stone mason, was about to retire, her apprentice came to her.

Gabriella sat near the river by a stone wall that had been rebuilt long ago by a mason named Tobias.

This wall was not as tall as the first one, nor was it as pretty, but when the

river rose against it, the wall did not move, and inside it no stone fought another.

Gabriella's assistant asked if she'd been the one to build it?

"No," she replied.

This was done by another who'd righted a wrong and was forgiven. (Pause)

This story, and the gospel reading today teaches the hard lesson of conflict resolution.

Most of us can go directly to the person
who has sinned against us.

Jesus taught that if that does not bring resolution
then gather another person or two people
to go to the one that's sinned in order
to regain them.

Perhaps you've done that, too.

The really hard step is when that second step fails
to bring the wrongdoer to repentance.

The third, the hardest, is the step of bringing
the matter to the congregation.

Yet, in the event that the first two steps don't bring
health back to the community, the
third is necessary.

We might ask ourselves what it was that
Jesus was worried about.

The answer/s may be revealed in the lessons
around the one read this morning.

At the start of chapter 18 of Matthew,

we are told that Jesus puts a child on his knee

to teach the disciples about who's the greatest.

The child, always seeks to learn.

The child is humble and impressionable.

If one wants to be great in the Jesus Kingdom,
be like the child, Jesus said.

Then he taught his disciples to not put
stumbling blocks in the path of these
little ones who believe in Jesus.

Better to have a millstone put around your neck and
be drowned than to cause a little one to be
kept from coming to Jesus.

And then he told them the parable of the lost sheep.

The one that goes astray, is the one
the Good Shepherd goes after.

All this leads up to the lesson read today on
resolving conflict and correcting someone's sin.

This tells me that Jesus was worried about
his followers using their authority as
a permission to do dangerous or
abusive behavior, in the name of God.

A lesson not only for those disciples, but
for each and every one of us.

For we are all disciples of Jesus, right?

A lesson teaching us to never use language
or participate in behavior that is dangerous
or abusive to others.

And then, if by chance we do participate in
that behavior, then listen to the one, two,
three people who come asking for us to stop.

For the sake of the common good.

Stop the hurtful behavior.

Finally, the text that comes after this one
ties it all together.

But that's next week's gospel.

AMEN!