

“Conflict in the Kingdom of God”

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Well, this is a fun passage. All of us love conflict, don't we?

My introduction today seems ill-advised in so many ways. I came home Wednesday night after our church meeting and I had a conversation with my wife. She said to me, “Have you seen the kitchen?” [Laughter.] My response was not what she expected. [Laughter.] I think I was stony-faced and defensive, waiting to see what she might say next. And, she was surprised by this, because she thought I would be delighted. I had the intuition to understand that likely what she meant is that while I was at church, she had the time to clean the whole kitchen; within our household of six that can pile up into something quite amazing.

I don't know if it's true in your household, but in our household, throughout our 14 years of marriage, chores and how we manage to take care of our lives together has at times been a source of tension between us. [Laughter.] So, I was defensive. I did not hear what she was saying. I heard what I *expected* she *might* be saying, and I was tensing up. It took a while for me to get past this to hear – no – she was just interested in letting me know, and she thought I would be happy about it, and was somewhat surprised that I was behaving so strangely.

There are many opportunities for conflict in our lives, so many it is nearly constant. What I just described to you was an opportunity for us to “miss-hear” one another. I was hearing what I expected to hear, rather than what she was intending to say. It is an example of a place where we were interdependent on one another; the way that my actions or inactions affected her, and we were sharing a task together and, as you saw from my response, there was the opportunity for defensiveness and a lack of dialogue.

Fisher and Shapiro, a pair of authors who wrote, “Negotiating beyond Reason Using Emotions as you Negotiate,” highlighted how difficult it is to come to a decision with someone else. All of these emotional pit falls as we try to get to an answer. They have identified five core concerns. And these are the things that they described, and regardless of whatever the content of our discussion is, we can feel unappreciated. That our thoughts, feelings or actions are devalued. We can feel a lack of affiliation, which they describe, as you are treated as an adversary, or kept at a distance, or you're not treated as a colleague with someone who has full participation in the decision-making.

We can become upset because we feel that our autonomy is threatened, that we don't have the freedom to make a decision, or to be making our own decisions, the feelings that someone else is making decisions on our behalf. We can feel our status threatened, that our relative standing is treated as inferior to that of others, or we can be frustrated in the role that we provide or were given – that our role is not fulfilling.

The role of doing dishes can be unfulfilling. I have found the secret of happiness in mindless, repetitive work – and it is podcasts. [Laughter.] That is my advice to you all.

[Laughter.] It is that you seek to find happiness in these tasks. Listen to many books and authors amidst podcasts.

But these are ways that we have opportunities for conflict in our midst. Conflict is a normal part of life, it is not something we can escape. Sadly, it is something we can anticipate and count on. Even when everybody is acting in their best faith, there will be moments of conflict – things we don't understand, miscommunications between the competing resources and passions, between having different expectations and desires that are in conflict with one another.

I remember when my son Asher was four. He would get in his mind something that he wanted to do that day, and it just so happened that I didn't know what that was, and I didn't plan for it. It didn't go that way and there was a difficult conversation to be had. It is not only between 4-year-olds and their parents. We get expectations, we get set on something internally, and then we are in conflict with one another as those expectations clash.

Perhaps the largest source of communication, or conflict, is miscommunication: We are not good at hearing one another. We hear what we expect to hear; we hear what we already are picturing in our minds. I have encountered conflicts that were two years old that were all based on a misunderstanding from an initial conversation. And two years later, they still did not understand that they were talking about two different things. There are many opportunities for us to fall in conflict.

The passage today speaks specifically about conflict in the church. I have encountered a number of people who have been disillusioned to find that conflict happens even in the church. It is true - we in church get into disagreements and have conflicts.

We can see it in the earliest churches recorded in the New Testament. We see Paul admonishing his congregation, the ones that he started that had very little time to develop systemic conflict. In Philippians 4, we see him pleading with Euodia and Syntyche to get along with one another. In I Corinthians 1:10-14 he seems visibly frustrated. He is saying, "I plead with you that there not be any divisions among you. I hear that some are saying that 'I follow Paul,' or, 'I follow Apollos.' I am thankful that I did not baptize many of you, that you cannot claim that you follow me because I baptized you. Is Christ divided?" There are opportunities for conflict from the very beginning of the Church.

I studied under a professor who used Bowen's Family System Theory to understand systemic conflict in congregations. It was a great help to us to understand the challenges of family both within our own family and others that we interacted with, but he used it to describe the challenge of people existing and getting along together in a congregation. Congregations can be a little bit like family. In family we care enough to fight. We care enough about something we are willing to fight about it. And that can be true in churches too. There are things that we are impassioned about, and we don't just walk away because it is important to us. The place, the experience, the history in our lives – we have a connection to it and it matters to us. We can have differences of values. We can have disagreements over what is right and wrong.

Our congregation over this last year has been discerning Sanctuary and Immigration. We had, I think, a very lovely listening session a couple of weeks back where we were able to

come together and share what everybody's perspectives were on this [issue] and listen and be honest with one another. That is an example of the kind of things where people disagree – where it is not clear to everyone in this same way how we should respond.

Speed Leas is a conflict author and a retired conflict consultant in churches. He wrote many books regarding conflict. In his models of conflict, he described five levels of conflict in congregations and systems outside of that.

The first level of conflict is “ideal,” is that there is a problem to solve. That is not where Tracy and I met when she mentioned the kitchen. We need to get back to that. It is this beautiful place where there are two people, and you can see there is a problem to be solved. You can set the problem on the table, look at it together and see how you can come to an agreement about it. It is a perfect place of not being against one another but being together working against a problem.

The second stage of conflict that he [Leas] described was “disagreement.” In this, he described, there are mixes of personalities and issues. The problem cannot be clearly defined and there is the beginning of distrust and personalizing the problem.

The third level he described as “contest.” This is the beginning of dynamics of win-lose; personal attacks, the formation of factions, sides, camps, distortion: a major problem.

The fourth level, “fight and flight,” shifts from winning to getting rid of a person. Factions are solidified; talk now takes on a language of principle, not issues.

The fifth level of conflict is “intractable situations.” In this level the conflict is no longer clear. There is no longer a clear understanding of issues. Personalities have become the focus. Conflict is now unmanageable, and energy is now centered on the elimination and or the destruction of persons.

I regret to say that I have seen all five of these levels of conflict in congregations throughout my life. When I was a seminary intern, my mentor's Supervising Pastor for three years was forced out of our congregation in the midst of conflict, and he was forced to resign. I had the opportunity, as I was going through my conflict and conciliation seminar, to write a case study on what I had experienced in the midst of it. Our congregation here, too, has faced conflict. As I have been briefed on the history of our congregation, one of the things I have been given was our 1994 Long Range Plan, where a consultant from the Alban Institute came and worked with five different teams within the congregation – one of them was a conflict team – and they were addressing the challenges back in the 1980's of our congregation, and facing conflict together, as some pastors had been in conflict with the congregation, and left.

So, if conflict is all around us, if it is inevitable, if as Speed Leas suggests that the escalation of conflict is predictable, and perhaps inevitable without someone managing it, what are we to do? How do we respond in the midst of this challenge of being humans together, and perhaps more specifically, how do we respond to this conflict in the kingdom of God? How do we be the people of God in the face of these challenges?

The text that we have here today in Matthew 18 is the beginning of a response to that. It is a pattern that has been used by many organizations regarding conflict and conciliation. It is not a complete guide. It is not for every type of conflict. In fact, this passage was specifically about church discipline which is not what every conflict is. But, there are things that we can see in this that relate to many opportunities or many situations of conflict that we find, and an opportunity to be part of it.

Jesus said in the midst of these parables, regarding people falling away, if a member of church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. It sounds simple, [but] it is not easy though, is it? There are so many easier things to do than going to talk to the person you are in conflict with.

Some of the easier things might be to ignore it. I have observed, in coming to Iowa, a midwestern value that some people call “Iowa nice.” And, perhaps an uncharitable view of “Iowa nice” might be, let’s just not say the hard things. Isn’t it easier to just set that aside and not say those things to one another?

I might be reticent to come and speak to people about things that are hard. Even more challenging is the opportunity, when we are in the midst of when we have been hurt by somebody, or we are frustrated by a situation. We may want to talk to other people. This can be benign, or even healthy, if it is just seeking counsel or seeking encouragement, sharing with a trusted confidante, who can tell us how they see the situation and encourage us on how we can best approach it.

Unfortunately, there is a cost to that. The cost is that it spreads the conflict. Now there are two people who are upset with somebody, perhaps.

Worse yet, there is just gossip. We share with people around us. We don’t talk specifically to the person who we are upset with. We just talk quietly with one another about it, and there are costs to this.

One, as I said, is that person how has multiple people in conflict with them and they probably don’t even know it. Another, once it becomes larger than just one other person, is that now you have hurt their reputation without having even gone to them; you have cost the other people’s view of them to be diminished, and that is costly. So, Jesus’ admonishment is to go to them when you are alone. That is not easy, but it appears to be something that Christ calls us to do – to have an obligation perhaps even to do.

Now I will say that this is an ideal case scenario: Christ is setting for us a pattern that if everything worked perfectly this is what it might look like. But, as I mentioned to you, the levels of conflict that Speed Leas described of third, fourth and fifth levels of conflict where there are factions and hostility, is beyond a place where one person can just go to another and fix the problem. This is what can happen if you can nip it in the bud before things escalate.

I will say, too, that there are situations where the person who has been hurt may not feel safe going to that person. Perhaps you can imagine that someone who is in a position of greater power may not feel that they are safe going and speaking to that person, and there are situations where we must find that there are better ways. But, when we can, our

obligation is to first seek personal reconciliation with one another – to go to one another. After that has failed, Jesus describes, then take two others with you (and he makes a reference to Old Testament court law where two or three witnesses were required to find someone guilty of something). What he is describing [is] bringing those others in to talk with one another. Perhaps you can imagine the benefit. There are times when we are in conflict with each other when we cannot talk. There is no longer trust, or there is no longer an ability to hear one another, and a mediator is helpful.

This is a very soft version of that. An opportunity to bring a third person in who is capable of helping the two hear one another, of establishing and enforcing some ground rules about speaking in a way that is not hostile.

When we go to one another, Jesus described in that first step that the goal is to win your brother back – that you have gained a brother again. I assume he is describing two men in a congregation, which would have been the normal way of talking in the New Testament. Our motive for going to one another is one of love. It is one of approaching them, so we can reconcile. We aren't necessarily naturally prone to approach someone that way.

When I have just been hurt, when someone has just cut me off in traffic, my first response may not be something loving. [Laughter.] Sometimes it takes some preparation on our part before we can approach someone and seek reconciliation.

Referring back to my initial conversation or description of Tracy sharing information with me. When we feel accused – and she wasn't even accusing me – I just felt that. When we feel accused we stop listening. That is, we can't hear anything else. All we can do is defend. So, how do we share with one another without accusing? How do we speak the truth in love with one another, as Ephesians 4:2 calls us to?

Finally, or not finally, but the third step that Jesus describes, is that if these two or three don't work out then take it to the church. Now, in this, our setting today, that might look like the beginning of a formal process: Going into the Session of our congregation and having them deal with it. You will notice that the first two steps were private. They allowed everybody in the conflict to be protected from it spreading and affecting them, because just the very spreading can make it difficult to resolve the conflict – the pain and the cost becomes so high. But by this third stage – perhaps becoming more public – and finally, if that does not work, Jesus describes treating the person as you would a tax collector or a sinner: expel them from your congregation; excommunicate them. That sounds very harsh.

As my father – when I was a child – would preach regarding this: How do we treat those outside of our congregation? How do we treat the sinner? How do we treat the tax collector? We desire for them that they would know God and join us again. So it is not an angry cut off; but rather a separation, with the hope they could one day be restored.

We see, in the themes of this passage, a desire for those in conflict to diminish spreading it around – to go into a confrontation with the hope of reconciliation, to go in love and a call not to ignore conflict, but that we might win one another back, by sharing with each other when there has been concern.

In 1994, in the Long Range Plan, there were a number of things that the committee of that time recommended that the congregation do. One was to accept the conflict as a normal part of life. Another was to be willing to have vibrant conversation with one another about things that they disagreed about. Another was to take ownership of the responsibility to find out about things that were concerning you.

They were also recommending that this congregation consider adopting the rules for the “Guidelines for Presbyterians During Times of Disagreement.” It might interest you to know that our Session, last November, adopted these guidelines and I would encourage you to take it out of your bulletin. We printed it for you.

Given the many ways that we have opportunities to be in conflict with one another, these are commitments of how we can be together in the midst of disagreement in a way that we can seek to find peace and build trust. That we can lower distrust where we see it. That we can facilitate communication and allow ourselves to hear one another and to be peace makers. As the Scripture was specific to church discipline, this set of guidelines is specific to disagreeing over an issue, so this is not a personal conflict with one another, but as the Scripture passage has important elements that we can take from it to apply to all conflicts, so this too has important elements of charity and peace seeking that we can take to all levels of conflict.

I would invite you, if you would be willing, to read along as I say this. I won't force you to read aloud with me.

Guidelines for Presbyterians during Times of Disagreement

In a spirit of trust and love, we promise we will...

Give them a hearing...listen before we answer.

1. Treat each other respectfully so as to build trust, believing that we all desire to be faithful to Jesus the Christ: We will keep our conversations and communications open for candid and forthright exchange. We will not ask questions or make statements in a way which will intimidate or judge others.
2. Learn about various positions on the topic of disagreement.
3. State what we think we have heard and ask for clarification before responding, in an effort to be sure we understand each other.

We will Speak the Truth in Love: (Ephesians 4:15)

4. Share our concerns directly with individuals or groups with whom we have disagreements in a spirit of love and respect, in keeping with Jesus' teachings.
5. Focus on ideas and suggestions instead of questioning people's motives, intelligence or integrity. We will not engage in name-calling or labeling of others prior to, during, or following the discussion.

6. Share our personal experiences about the subject of disagreement so that others may more fully understand our concerns.

Maintain the Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace: (Ephesians 4:3)

7. Indicate where we agree with those of other viewpoints as well, as where we disagree.
8. Seek to stay in community with each other though the discussion may be vigorous and full of tension: We will be ready to forgive and be forgiven.
9. Follow these additional guidelines when we meet in decision-making bodies: We will urge persons of various points of view to speak and promise to listen to these positions seriously, seek conclusions informed by our points of agreement; be sensitive to the feelings and concerns of those who do not agree with the majority and respect their rights of conscious. Abide by the decision of the majority, and if we disagree with it and wish to change it, work for that change in ways which are consistent with these Guidelines.
10. Include our disagreements in our prayers, not praying for the triumph of our viewpoints, but seeking God's grace to listen attentively, to speak clearly, and to remain open to the vision God holds for us all.

These are methods and tools we can use when we gather as the body of Christ. To seek to be faithful; to seek to find peace; to seek to lower mistrust and miscommunication, so that we can get along with one another and be of one mind.

There are many opportunities for conflict in our world. Regrettably, we can count on conflict. We will have times when we are frustrated with one another, when dishes need to be done and someone hasn't done them, and we will need tools for how to address this. God calls us to join God in God's work in the reconciliation of bringing peace, of lowering conflict and allowing us to be in God's reconciling work. Let us be part of what God is doing. Amen.