

SERMON: Loving Conflict: Listen and Learn
TEXT: Acts 15:12-13

10-11-2020

“Loving” Conflict. Is it a verb or an adjective? Well, I certainly don’t know very many people who “love” conflict, but it’s not unheard of. Most of us avoid conflict. It makes us tense and anxious. We often think of it in a negative way. And when we’re in the midst of it...let’s be honest... we’re not very good at it. It’s hard to disagree and be nice about it.

So, what I really want to stress today is the idea of approaching conflict in a “loving” way. That, too, may seem like a rare thing in our world, but it does exist. And we would probably develop a greater appreciation of conflict if more people were able to engage it in a loving way.

I think we all know people who enjoy arguing simply for argument’s sake. I knew a man in Springfield who admitted to arguing with his father-in-law - fiercely playing the role of devil’s advocate - simply because it was “fun” to see him get worked up.

And if you have any experience with children - especially siblings - you probably have had occasion to tell one not to react when another one is arguing,

because that's what he wants. "Ignore him, and he'll stop." "Disengage." "Walk away."

Walking away seems to be the favored solution among most of the adults I know. But this is only a temporary fix. Unresolved disagreement will likely come up again. And healthy relationships depend on being able to disagree and navigate conflict in a way that doesn't harm the relationship.

We're living in a time when so many relationships have been harmed by political disagreements. If you're on Facebook, you've probably seen people writing about how they have been "unfriended" or have "unfriended" others because of differing political opinions. Family members don't speak to one another and refuse to spend holidays together because they can't even manage to be in the same room. The conflict permeates the atmosphere with a heavy tension that can be "cut with a knife."

I think it's safe to say that every family - and every church, for that matter - has experience with this, whether over politics or life choices or the color of the carpet. And beware of those who say they have no conflict in their church or

family! It's there; it's just behind the scenes and behind your back. And pretending it's not there can be even worse than fighting with one another.

This sermon begins a series in three parts based on a document published by the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program of the PC(USA). *Seeking to be Faithful Together: Guidelines for Presbyterians in Times of Disagreement* was originally adopted by the General Assembly in 1992, but it has resurfaced this year for these exceptionally troubling times. The guidelines are written in the form of a commitment that we can make with one another in the church, whether we are working together in a committee, on the Session, or in the more casual encounters among members.

Today we are focusing on the first section of the commitment: "In a spirit of trust and love, we promise we will give them a hearing...listen before we answer." This is based on two scriptures. Proverbs 18:13, "If one gives an answer before hearing, it is folly and shame." And John 7:51, a question posed by Nicodemus in defense of Jesus: "Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?"

Give them a hearing. Listen before we answer. We are all guilty of judging people before we know them. We make assumptions about their actions or words rather than waiting for an explanation. I'm sure you've heard the common sense theory of why God created us with two ears and only one mouth: so that we would listen *twice as much* as we talk! It's only funny because it's true. Many of us do a good deal more talking than listening. We know how important listening is, but we are also deeply rooted in the practice of listening - not for understanding - but for the purpose of formulating our response.

I also chose the scripture lesson from Acts, as it gives a good demonstration of listening in the midst of conflict. As contemporary theologian William Willimon wrote to introduce Chapter 15, "The joy and peace which ended the account of the first stages of the gentile mission [from Chapters 13 and 14] is broken with this story of *no small dissension and debate* over the issue of whether gentile converts should be circumcised and become Jews before they could be Christians." (William H. Willimon, ACTS, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)

Indeed, this was a major controversy in the early church. But, at least with the two verses we read, it seems to have been dealt with in a very healthy way. Let's hear those verses again. "The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to

Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them and among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, *My brothers, listen to me.*”

If you read the whole story, you’ll find that James *isn’t* arguing with Paul and Barnabus, as it seems here. In fact, they agree on most points. But what I want us to pay attention to is the listening that happens among them and the crowd. Paul and Barnabus spoke first, and the whole assembly **listened in silence**. No whispering to one another what they heard from so-and-so. No shaking heads or crossing arms in disagreement or disgust. They listened for the purpose of learning. Then, only when Paul and Barnabus were finished speaking did James begin, with a request that they return the favor, and now listen to him.

When I was serving a church in Iowa, I took my turn to lead worship at the local nursing home on Sunday afternoon. There was one man who always came to worship, he was always pleasant and welcoming, he even approached me after every service to thank me for the message. I believe he was a Missouri Synod Lutheran, so for him to even participate in worship led by a woman was a big deal. After one service, he came to me as always and reached out his hand to shake mine. I did likewise, but when I tried to let go, he held on. He began to talk about

the things we had in common as Christians, despite our denominational differences. I smiled and nodded in agreement, yet all the while wondering when he was going to release my hand from his firm grip. I knew he must be leading up to something. Finally, he asked me a question about communion. "Do you serve wine as the symbol of the blood of Christ?" "No," I answered. "We serve grape juice." "Well, that's where you're wrong," he replied. At that moment, he released my hand and said his goodbye. With his confident pronouncement of the truth, he brought our conversation to a close.

He was so nice about it, I couldn't be angry. I chuckled about it as I left the nursing home that day, and it makes me smile still when I think about it. He was certainly respectful to me, and he acknowledged that we shared a common faith. He was not intimidating nor did he put me down or insult me. He communicated with me in a loving manner.

On the other hand, his way of communicating was entirely one way. He talked and I listened. He was clearly not interested in hearing about my perspective - the reasons why we serve grape juice rather than wine. He did not ask, nor did he give me a chance to explain my point of view. He was not willing to LISTEN AND LEARN.

God calls us to be faithful together, especially when it's hard. Especially when we disagree. In a spirit of trust and love, may we all strive to engage in LOVING CONFLICT: to LISTEN AND LEARN... to the glory of God!

AMEN.