

Conflict Resolution

Jeremiah 6: 10-17

Matthew 10: 34-39

Things have gotten so polarized among people that there are few things we can talk about rationally any longer. Maybe you can talk about the weather, but don't let the subject of global warming out of the bag. It could be like opening Pandora's Box. So even with the weather, be careful what you talk about.

There are certain people with whom we cannot talk about certain things. There are people with whom you may be in agreement on one subject who will rip you apart – just verbally, we hope – if you don't give your assent to another position they hold.

This creates an inability to talk about certain things. When certain things are not permitted to be discussed because it might upset someone, you could just as easily be describing a family dynamic that doesn't deal with, say, substance abuse. Called a dysfunctional family, it avoids talking about certain things which reflect the truth of what is going on. Excuses are ready made for someone's problem, answers are ready for questions that should *never* be asked in the first place, behaviors are ordered around a person's drinking or drug problems in order to provide cover, and a host of other characteristics dominate life in the dysfunctional family to guard against speaking about the unspeakable, which is that someone has a drug or alcohol problem (or some other problem like domestic violence or sexual assault, etc.).

While it isn't a **direct** parallel by any means, we are increasingly becoming a dysfunctional civil society where we cannot talk about difficult issues because people become so upset, outraged, furious, venomous, and toxic. We have always been a society of passionate viewpoints, fractious and divided, but unified in a sense of shared quest for a better society. But when it becomes either/or, friend or enemy, then the sense of shared quest is lost; the vision for a future together gets sacrificed on the altar of despair and cynicism. Nothing can get done and people feel powerless to change anything.

Authoritarianism becomes more attractive because there is a sense that someone will get *something* done, even if they have to break all the rules, laws, traditions, and social contracts on which a functional society operates. It's a dangerous place to be, but I don't get the sense that the majority of Americans want anything like a dictator, like a Putin in Russia who silences, arrests, or kills his opponents. But there are plenty of folks who would accept it if it was aligned with their agenda – a dangerous place to be.

That's the thing: when you can't talk about things, have constructive conversations, negotiate points of view, and be committed to finding common ground despite differences, you can't get anywhere. Not doing those things fuels the hopelessness and despair which arises because problems never get dealt with.

This also means accepting that there *will* be conflict, that you won't readily agree, and that it will be difficult to move forward, but that conflict is necessary to retain functionality *and* to make progress. It's like the bulletin cover, a ship striving amid a

stormy sea, but with a rainbow on the horizon representing the promise of meeting the challenge of conflict. (Okay, the ship is sailing *away* from the rainbow, but nothing's so perfect.)

In the passage from Jeremiah, it begins with Jeremiah's own expression of frustration with God's people. Nothing he says seems to move people to turn toward God in faithfulness. *Who will listen to me? Their ears are closed ... The word of the lord is offensive to them ... I'm full of the wrath of the Lord, and I cannot hold it in.*

God understands and replies, *Pour it out! [Pour the wrath of God out on everyone.]* What does this wrath look like? *Their houses will be turned over to others, together with their fields and their wives.*

What is the nature of God's complaint (and Jeremiah's)? *From the least to the greatest, all are **greedy** for gain; prophets and priests alike all practice **deceit**. They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is **no peace**.*

That last line - *'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is **no peace*** – is the ultimate deceit. It's what we say when we want a problem to simply go away. We don't want to deal with it. We say that everything is fine. We posture that we have no idea what *their* problem is. It's like the dysfunctional family when the wife has bruises and a black eye: *Oh, that. She had a silly fall; she really messed herself up. But everything's fine.*

God is not fooled by deceit. And God can tell that they're avoiding the issues of God's concern. Why? It may hurt their pocketbook. It may require them to change. It may mean sacrificing their own self-righteousness. It may not agree with their viewpoints on things. It may offend people and cause conflict in some way or another.

It comes down to the question: which is more important, avoiding any conflict and change, or accepting that there is conflict and working to understand it? How important are God's concerns when set up against our concerns about conflict and change? For God's people at this time, it's more important to sweep God's concerns under the carpet and declare "Peace, peace," when there is no peace.

Finally, there is a plea from God: *Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls.* (That sounds familiar, doesn't it?) God is reminding them that there was a time when there really was peace, an honest peace with integrity, when all sought such peace together. God implores them to seek out that good way and walk in it.

The answer comes: *But you said, 'We will not walk in it.'*

God continues: *I appointed watchmen over you* (likely referring here to prophets like Jeremiah) *and I said, 'Listen to the sound of the trumpet!'* Again the answer comes: *But you said, 'We will not listen.'*

God's concerns before God's people get no hearing, no attention, no engagement. They avoid it all and assure themselves that all is fine, nothing to worry about, nothing is happening that won't work itself out. They avoid conflict and change, and God promises that they will suffer as a result.

Truly, suffering is what results when problems and concerns are not addressed, but rather are ignored, downplayed, manipulated, and allowed to fester. The problems only get worse, more entrenched, and thanks to the dismissive attitudes, the intensity of the issues grows and grows. It can become self-destructive.

What remain outstanding are God's concerns for the poor, weak, sick, vulnerable, exploited, and outcast. The injustices and the deceitfulness about those injustices are made acceptable and normalized. That's the way it is. However, God knows full well that it isn't simply those weak ones who are being ignored; God is being ignored, too.

I'm sure it was early in the development of Jesus' ministry that he realized that his efforts at reforming the status quo in Judaism was going to provoke conflict. He had the record of the God's dealings with God's people from the Old Testament, the Hebrew scriptures that he seemed to know quite well. He also knew first and from the persecution and execution of John the Baptist just how vicious the conflict could be. Jesus had his gospel of good news, however it wasn't exactly good news for the wealthy, the powerful, and the righteous religious leadership.

Jesus knows that if people take his message seriously, there is going to be trouble. He makes it very clear in today's reading that he does **not** intend to be like any others who may have had nice words, reassuring expressions that all was fine and all would be well, pleasing oratory that told of bright futures, of the resurgence of a nation of people just for them, that this is what God was promising. It may have been patriotic and nationalist, religiously pious and ritually pure, recalling the good old days when David was king and the land prospered. Those would have been very popular messages, like the prosperity gospel we hear from certain megachurches. The problem with all of them is that God's concerns are not being addressed, but rather dismissed and ignored.

Jesus declares in today's passage from Matthew that he is none of those things. Indeed, he doesn't want to be known as the Prince of Peace, because the peace that people want is no peace at all. They don't want to be bothered with problems, conflict, or change. They simply want things the way they want it, the way things should be.

Jesus brings conflict and he knows it. Actually he insists on it. *Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.* The sword here is figuratively speaking. Jesus is not suddenly advocating violence, but acknowledging the reality of the impact of his message on peoples' lives.

Jesus continues to describe how the closest relationships will be brought into turmoil and conflict, even setting family members against each other – that will be the intense level of conflict that should be expected.

There is a reason for such conflict. It's akin to what Jeremiah was facing. Of what priority are God's concerns to God's people? For Jeremiah, the answer was essentially that it had no priority compared to going about their business undisturbed, unchanged, unmoved by the suffering of God's people around them.

Jesus is no less stark in his comparison, and maybe even more so. If those relationships that you have are more important than the gospel message of new life, justice, and real peace that comes from Jesus and from following him and his way, then such people are not worthy of Jesus, not worthy of his promise, and not worthy of the new life he brings. It is not the easy way, the popular way, the way of avoiding conflict. *Anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me, Jesus says. Whoever finds his life will lose it [by not following me], and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*

God's way, Jesus's way, is going to provoke conflict. It is going to open cans of worms for some people, fly in the face of what's accepted, challenge the standards, and break with traditions. It will be something people will turn away from as they seek to avoid conflict and change, preferring a contrivance of peace, an imagined peace, rather than a genuine peace that has the integrity of justice and the promise of new life for all.

Conflict resolution means engaging the issues and problems that exist with candor and a determination to address them. Avoiding conflict compounds problems and invites their worsening.

When the problems are concerns of Kingdom importance, affecting God's little people and impacting their well-being, they need to be confronted, even though it may involve sailing through some stormy seas to reach smoother sailing on the other side. Neither God nor Jesus imagine that this is easy, but both tell us that it's necessary.

May we have the faithfulness to engage conflict with a commitment toward resolution rather than other avenues which seek to dodge conflict and prolong the difficulties.