

Truth Amid Conflict

Jeremiah 6: 13-17 Matthew 10: 34-39

Conflict and truth go hand-in-glove throughout scripture. Recently we've gone over the stories of conflict between God and Jonah, God and Job, Jesus and the disciples, and Paul and Corinthians, to cite some examples. We ought to ask why it is that truth and conflict find each other so easily.

Frankly, truth can be a bitter pill, or a difficult subject. Conflict emerges because truth has been bypassed in one way or another.

In the competition of wills between Jonah and God, the truth was that a servant of the Lord, like Jonah, needed to respond to God's call, not to their own desires. You don't really get to pick when you'll serve and what you'll do. If God needs you someplace, or doing some thing, then you need to respond appropriately. Jonah doesn't even talk to God about his assignment, but defiantly heads off on his own in the opposite direction. A more constructive approach would have been to engage God and reflect on the nature of God's mission and his own calling. Maybe the conflict could have been avoided.

In the steady complaining of Job about the injustices he had suffered, the truth that Job needed to understand was that he was not God, and God didn't need to explain, much less justify God's own decisions with Job. Now the process could have been better. God might have given Job his counsel long before God blows him out of the water. It could have saved a lot of divine anger and human regret.

In both cases, we see the passive-aggressive mode. Jonah acts passively in not engaging God on his call to bring God's word to Nineveh, and then aggressively by hopping aboard a ship headed in the opposite direction of Nineveh. In Job's case, it is God who plays the passive-aggressive strategy. Rather than addressing Job's concerns, God passively lets him carry on and on and on. Then God acts aggressively in blasting the poor guy with blistering divine sarcasm.

Passive-aggressive sequences can become a standard pattern of some individuals, families, and organizations. If the passive aggressive actor (or actors) find that the strategy gets them what they want, it becomes standard, but it also makes the person, family, or organization quite dysfunctional. Issues that beg for a reasoned hearing, and a resolution with integrity, never get there.

There are other strategies that are just as dysfunctional. There is the coerce/collude dynamic which has people working, sometimes secretly together, to attack someone. They don't realize they're doing anything wrong – just like the passive-aggressive actor – it all seems perfectly okay to do what they're doing. But they're looking for ways to withhold information, surprise and ambush, and create a "gotcha" moment. The recent Benghazi hearing followed this model to a T, and came up short. It's a bullying tactic that's quite common.

Another strategy is fight/flight. This where an individual lashes out at someone and then storms out of the room. There is no chance for any meaningful discussion, and that's the whole idea. It's a my-way-or-the-highway kind of ultimatum that has no intention of ever having a meaningful conversation, but simply seeks to have their own way.

There's more, but you get the idea. These are strategies that seek to win, not to resolve. The truth that could be achieved gets sacrificed in the desire to have a victory, sometimes at any cost.

Truth itself can also be the cause of conflict. There are truths that no one wants to hear. In denying the possibility of that truth, dysfunctional conflict strategies get used to undermine, avoid, or ignore that truth. My recent work with race relations has showed that to be the case; unpleasant truths get confronted immediately, drawing attacks like metal to a magnet, and the silliest, most ridiculous and inaccurate reasons are readily employed.

When these unpleasant truths emerge in scripture, we can see reactions that are all too familiar. There is resistance, sometimes passive and sometimes active, and a readiness to deny them one way or another.

In the reading from Jeremiah, we hear God providing counsel to his people through the prophet Jeremiah. And we hear how the people steadfastly refuse to respond and implicitly seek to deny what they're being told.

It starts with condemnation of the greedy and unethical scheming, a condition that seems particularly galling because it not only covers the least to the greatest, but priests and prophets, too! While it's often the case that those on the lowest rung of the ladder get victimized and exploited by those at the top, even those at the bottom connive for unjust gain. The whole miserable lot is a mess.

The prophets adds the injunction, *They've treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, 'Peace, peace', when there is no peace.* We may not know the exact context, whether it is peace in the absence of war, or peace in the pretense of justice, or what since the word "peace" or *shalom* has such rich and varied meanings – all of these instances and more could apply. Clearly, the official word is that all is well and no, there are no problems.

A good contemporary example would be unemployment rates, currently 4.4% for whites – an excellent number that indicates statistically that whites enjoy full employment. However, for African Americans it stands at 9.2%, more than double the white experience, a level that is just below the worst unemployment levels nationally during the recession. If the nation was at 9.2% unemployment, people would be screaming for the government to do something. But the economists in government, academia, and the business community are saying, "All is well, we're near full employment nationally," or "Peace, peace," *shalom, shalom*.

The prophet continues God's denunciation, remarking, *they have no shame at all, they do not even know how to blush*. God promises that they will fall.

The prophet urges God's people to find new direction, to return to the ancient paths like their ancestors who wandered in the wilderness, seeking to follow faithfully where God would lead them. Or perhaps it means to follow the ways of Torah law and to walk faithfully in life practice – in a familiar expression, the text says: *Ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls*. (Sounds like something we heard Jesus say, right?) Either way you understand the passage, the people's response is, 'We're not going there.'

The appointed watchmen – plural watchmen – they sound the call of the trumpet. It may mean a warning of imminent danger and a call to action. Or it may be the sound of the *shofar* calling the faithful to repent, to get on their knees in prayer and seek forgiveness, to come before the Lord and seek his grace. Regardless, the people's response again is, "We're not listening."

The prophet will continue with God's denunciations, including a dismissal of their acts of worship. Their precious offerings and generous sacrifices cannot buy justice, peace, or the blessings of God. If anything, the insincerity of their worship, its superficiality, its self-serving, self-aggrandizing nature, and the notion that God can be bought off like everyone else in their society simply seems to increase the anger of God. False worship is probably worse than no worship at all.

The truth which God seeks to share with them through the prophet Jeremiah is dismissed and ignored. Their determined unwillingness to reckon with the truths with which God was confronting them became intolerable for God who condemns them to their fate with the Babylonian army. The breach in the relationship between God and his people was devastating.

Denying the truth has consequences, evident in conflict. Rejecting the notion that there is a truth to be discovered or learned is itself a commitment to rejecting those involved with that truth.

This is what Jesus is emphasizing in the passage from Matthew. He says: *Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword*. Sadly, this phrase has been used to justify violence done in Jesus' name, totally missing the point. Bringing the truth of the good news about God and the Kingdom, about new life in faith, would produce conflict – a sword, not peace.

As simple as that sounds to us – not peace but a sword – it probably sounded pretty simple to his audience. Yes, they likely understood that Jesus had offended powerful and important people who could feel threatened and respond with violence to his calls for justice and peace. They can understand that.

But Jesus takes them further into the realm of conflict that the truth of the good news will produce. Whole families will come apart at the seams from the conflict. Unimagined strife within families will occur for the truth to be brought into the light and a new way established. Truth can engender incredible reactions and strident, unyielding, vicious conflict. Conflict with strangers, conflict among erstwhile friends, conflict among countries are nothing compared to conflict in families and family like groupings. It's another whole other order of ugly.

In the context of Jesus' audience, the family is personal – mother, father, siblings and the rest – but it's also the family of faith. The religious faith and tradition that they all know and revere will be torn by the conflict engendered by Jesus' truth.

As if anticipating the objection, that love overcomes, that love is at the heart of Jesus' gospel message, that the good news is for peace, not strife and conflict, Jesus lays out the nature of his truth. Love of Jesus and his gospel message must be the priority relationship over all others. That's a tough one to swallow.

Not finished yet with this message of how his truth brings conflict, not peace, Jesus spells out the conflict that they can expect. *And whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*

In one sense, it is metaphorical about taking up one's cross, and losing one's life. That is the transformation that comes from embraces Jesus and his word of new life. But it also cautionary in this context, that the cost of discipleship is steep, and the nice thoughts of love, forgiveness, grace, healing, and new life come through a tempest of conflict, personal sacrifice, and even violence.

We, too, like to imagine that the gospel path of faith in Jesus and obedience to God is a truth anchored in peace, unity, harmony, and security. But Jesus warns that his truth brings conflict, even to the deepest relationships.

As the prophet Jeremiah admonished God's people in the first passage that you cannot have "peace, peace, *shalom, shalom*" when you're surrounded by the sins of injustice and exploitation, Jesus denies that his peace in any way infers an absence of conflict. Just the opposite, following his way of faith means confrontation with the powers and their best resistance to changes that Jesus' way of faith involves.

Conflict is truly unpleasant, and Jesus knows this. However, the truth of living faithfully and ministering with the values of the Kingdom as the priority can put us in those uncomfortable situations. The question we will always face is whether the truth of the gospel way will set us free, or whether the avoidance of conflict will keep us bound to the false peace that the world would most definitely prefer.