

## **Sermon for Sunday September 10, 2023 “Conflict Management”**

You know, we are all humans who get crosswise with each other in a wide variety of ways.

It's nothing new, or Jesus wouldn't have been talking about it in 32 AD.

When Doug and I saw the movie Oppenheimer last week, the story of the scientist who led the Manhattan project which created the first atomic bomb, we heard a good bit about how – post WWII – Oppenheimer was pilloried as not being sufficiently anti-Communist and he went from being the hero whose work ended the war to someone who was suspected of being a traitor. At one point, in a closed hearing that felt rather like a star chamber, he was challenged by a question regarding testimony by other Manhattan Project scientists. “Didn't the scientists disagree with each other and didn't some of them think the bomb should never be used?” Oppenheimer seemed befuddled by the question and said that he knew that scientists working together disagreed with all sorts of things; it was how they were trained. And even in the midst of disagreement, they could work together toward a common goal.

Would that we all could say that we always could work together despite disagreements toward a common goal! But we know that disagreements lead to conflict and bad behavior and pain and, sometimes, missing the point of the goal altogether.

But Jesus understands that even with this tendency, the goal of love of God and love of our fellow human beings must continue to be our primary task. And so, here in this Gospel today we have one of the most pointed and pragmatic set of instructions for conflict management. Something to note here: Jesus clearly knows who we are. We are people who, in our worst moments, get into conflict with each other. And because Jesus knows who we are, he also knows how difficult it is for us to stop being in conflict with each other.

So he describes a process. Importantly, the process is focused on the action that has offended us, not the person. When someone hurts us, it is helpful to say to the person, “your action hurt me.” It is distinctly unhelpful to say “you’re an awful so-and-so because you hurt me.” Maybe they are an awful so-and-so and maybe they’re not: the idea is to focus on the offense, because then you’ve got a fighting chance for changing the person’s behavior. The moment you respond to an offense by decrying the person who did them, they are forever the offense, not the person who did the offense.

I know.

I hear you thinking “but what about this person who did this thing and hurt me and won’t even agree that it was a hurtful thing?”

Jesus knows, too.

So he offers the next level of work: don’t go alone. Go again, this time with a person or two who are appropriate witnesses to the offensive act, who can back you up. They can also witness the fact that you had the conversation with the offender. This is raising the stakes a bit, because no one wants to feel like they’ve been double-teamed. But you want to stress the importance of their acknowledging the offense, and the presence of a companion or two sometimes does that. Again, focus on the offense more than the person. Think about a court case: it does not advance your position to respond to a query asking what happened by saying “that person is a mean-spirited idiot.” The judge will likely tell your lawyer “control your client, Counselor.” Why? Because the judge wants to render judgement based on the action, not the person. Yes, the person will be punished if the judge so rules, but it’s the action that matters here. They will be punished for the action, not because they’re not nice.

So you’ve raised the ante by meeting with the person with a witness or two handy. Does the offender recognize that they went too far or did something that caused pain?

Again, Jesus knows us, so he has a plan if the offender doesn't acknowledge it and repent.

Jesus says "tell it to the church." Now, that lands on our ears with a thud. What do you do? Go up front during announcement time and say "Joe Jones stole my credit card and spent a whole bunch of money on scratch-offs" or "Janie Doe told lies about me to everyone"..."and when I tried to tell them I was hurt by this, they just laughed at me?"

It might not play out the way the words say, but what Jesus is pointed toward is the fact that you are part of a particular community, perhaps your faith community, and you know that you share common values with those people. If you share this story with that community, they may convince the offender that she or he needs to ask for forgiveness and to make restitution for the harm done. I've actually seen this work in a parish with conflict, where most members of the church who were unhappy with the behavior of a small group of people went to that small group and said "C'mon. This isn't the way we're supposed to act. This also isn't the answer to the matter you think is a problem. Stop it, please."

Did it solve the problem? Mostly. One person continued to roil the waters, but all the other dissenters stopped and entered into conversation with the leader they were angry at, a conversation that was facilitated by a couple of the parishioners who knew this wasn't the way to be church.

Jesus does have some good ideas, am I right?

But then there are the situations where an offender refuses to listen, refuses to hear the harm they have caused, refuses to admit that they need to stop.

Jesus wouldn't have given us these instructions if he didn't understand that sometimes you can't crawl out of the mess, and some troubled souls can cause harm not only to the original person who was hurt, but to the whole community.

And so Jesus gives us the nuclear option.

*“If the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”*

Then, and only then, is a final judgment rendered, and the person is cast out, just as in Jesus’ day, a tax collector was unwelcome in the temple because they were employed by the Roman empire and a Gentile was unwelcome in the Temple because he was not a Jew.

It’s interesting the only in the last step is a person’s very identity, their personhood, the thing that is addressed. All of the steps of the plan are about admission that an act was done that was bad, not that the person was bad...until this last one.

Because Jesus knows that once we start identifying people as bad, they’re stuck in that place of knowing that they are unloved, untrusted, even hated. Whereas, if the focus is on the deed done, there can be admission that we did something bad, we’re sorry we hurt someone, and we hope we can be reconciled.

Did you notice that it is only in that last sentence that I used the word “we?”

And yet we are the ones who do things like this. Look me in the eye and tell me that you have never ever even thought that a person that hurt us was a hateful nasty piece of work and we wished bad things would happen to them. I cannot claim it. I expect you can’t either.

Here’s what I do know, though: when we start attacking the character of another child of God, even one who hurt us deeply, we hang around our neck a yoke of hatred. It doesn’t fix the pain we may feel when we have been offended. It amplifies it.

Jesus knows this. Of course he does. He died on the cross because some people felt threatened by his words and they couldn’t back down, even though they probably knew

he meant them no harm...and they crucified him, calling him hateful names. Jesus knows how this works all too well.

And so this gospel.

Here's another thing I know: in our world today, there are all sorts of awful things being said and thought about people with whom we disagree. This is a parish that has people who are very conservative and people who are very liberal and a whole bunch who are somewhere in the middle. We gather to follow Jesus, and we hold lightly our disagreements over secular matters, because Jesus is more important. Our faith is more important. And I know that there are people in this parish who may think in their darker moments "how could that person, my longtime friend, support that issue? Are they stupid or something? Are they swayed by rhetorical excesses? Do they really believe that stuff?" Or they may post something on social media that makes evident their thoughts about their friends who differ with them on something. They attack a person with whom they have a relationship, and sometimes that means that the relationship, even within their church family, come to an end.

What if we stopped posting attack memes on Facebook? What if we stopped gossiping and whispering "did you know that our friend is actually supporting THAT candidate? What is our friend thinking?"

What if we started saying to people with whom we disagree that we love them and we understand that their position is one we cannot get behind, but we'll never stop loving them?

Because each and every person in the world, including ones who drive us a little crazy or who get on our last nerve or who don't understand all the facts because otherwise they wouldn't say those things...

... is first and foremost a beloved child of God. Just as each of us is a beloved child of God. Full Stop.

Because the goal is simple. Love God. Love each other. It's not about winning an argument. It's not about shaming those who believe differently. Just this: Love God. Love one another. Jesus gave us a plan. We need to live into it.

May we keep that goal foremost in our hearts and minds.

Amen.