

Conflict, who has heard of such a thing?

September 7, 2014

Matthew 18:15-20

15 "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. 18 Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. 19 Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

Today, we get to listen and hear the word of God in relationship to conflict. It seems crazy because we are a church and conflict and the church do not go together. To even consider such a thing is blasphemous right? Wrong! We are human, humans have conflict end of story. So how do we approach conflict biblically and how do we approach it as individuals and as a body of believers?

You see conflict in the church is inevitable but how we handle it, deal with it, name it, own it, and most importantly grow from it helps us utilize conflict for the glory of God.

That in itself is a strange way of looking at conflict right? Using conflict to glorify God? Now we are really talking heresy and blasphemy. Conflict though has a kind of negative connotation. While we may or may not dismiss words and their similar meanings to one another we can not discount that two words may mean very similar things but they can give a very different connotative feel to the circumstances for which they are used.

We have to understand the language we use in the church and in our faith lives. To not understand the language we use and to fail to use it properly often helps to create, foster, and even build into the conflicts already inherent within the body.

So what is conflict? The definition we would be using is in the noun form and it means "discord of action, feeling, or effect; antagonism or opposition, as of interests or principles." (Websters, Dictionary.Com) Essentially this means opposing viewpoints on how or what to do in the life of the church. Often, instead of this milder definition we tend to take the other definition of conflict as in battle and draw our lines in the sand and gather our forces to fight it out and the most faithful will of course win.

We too often see the fallout of this battleground mentality. See conflict in the church is not supposed to be about winning or losing but about growing and seeing one another's differing views in light of God. Too often though it creates a level of discord and hurt that people as individuals and the church as a body can not always overcome. Sometimes we do shake it off but other times the conflict circles around something that is of paramount importance to us personally in the life of the church, how we worship, or what we do as our mission or the music or a variety of other things. The lines get drawn and inevitable someone leaves or the discord continues and the conflict does not get resolved. Instead it is pushed aside or the group in "power" does it their way with the ever present mumblings of those who did not get what they wanted still lurking in the corners of the sanctuary or in the parking lot after the service has ended.

A couple of weeks ago we had the annual Ministry Training workshop. This year's workshop centered on Worship and what we could cover in a short time span on all that goes into a church Worship service. An activity we did centered on the most important elements in our worship service. One of the most revealing things that I believe came to light from this and surprised those who participated was that the only piece of music that was deemed important as a must have was the offering in music. Everything else was not given the same level of value as other elements like communion, the scripture, or even the sermon.

This is revealing and surprising in some ways considering that most of us familiar with church life are well aware that the 'Devil will enter the church through the choir loft.' We have heard that one a time or two or experienced it ourselves. The blunt truth is that most church conflict deals with music, the type, what is sung, the way it is sung, who sings it, when etc.

I want to be clear too that I am not pointing fingers or drawing lines in the sand. I just know how important it is for us a church and as individuals to understand and appreciate one another before, in the middle of, and after periods of conflict and use them for growth within the church.

You see as Disciples of Christ we live under the belief that in essentials unity and in non-essentials charity and in everything love. We tend to forget that principle understanding and belief during periods of conflict. We tend to dwell on the non-essentials and forget to be charitable and loving towards one another. Because at the end of the day it is not what we were discussing that matters but rather HOW we discuss it that matters. People do not get upset over the issues so much as the feelings that get hurt over how they are treated throughout the disagreement. Compromise and working together take a back seat to power and control and charity and love get left in the dust as we barrel on towards some end.

My friends we have a belief system that equalizes us. There is no hierarchy in our faith. Because we believe in the inherent saving nature of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of our lives and the world we are all called to be Christ in this world. Each person who believes is on equal footing with the next who also believes in that saving grace.

How we practice that belief or live it out does differ. Let us be honest in admitting that in our striving to live a life like Jesus we sometimes find ourselves more like the Pharisees in our holier than thou attitude over the humility of Christ. We are human after all. But too here in the Gospel of Matthew we are given a guideline of sorts to see one another with eyes of grace as we come to points of disagreement and conflict whatever those points may be.

So let us look at these guidelines. This chapter in Matthew is the go-to guide for conflict resolution. It shows us the biblical way of handling conflict. It is important to note that this is an aggressive tactic. It does not ask you to sit passively, it instead asks us to take action to resolve conflict so that it does not hinder us in our faith lives. That is important to note, not acting quickly and acknowledging and then handling the conflict makes it typically more difficult to be resolved and it often means we lose our patience being gracious and loving and most importantly forgiving of one another. The conflict can then snowball from a simple thing between two individuals into a me vs. them vs. us vs. everyone problem creating a chasm that can take years or is sometimes never truly resolved.

So take a look at this scripture. It starts by saying if one sins against you go directly to them and talk to them about it directly. I think this is the most important step of all the steps. You see our first inclination is to talk about it with others instead of just saying to a person you know you may not realize it but you hurt my feelings or I disagree with you on whatever. If we went to one another first how fewer battle lines could be drawn?

The second step is to take a couple others along with you. This is where it gets tricky because those others are not there to back you up in what you say or believe but rather their purpose is to act as mediators. Jesus says that these individuals essentially confirm what has been said between the two parties and give evidence to both sides of the discussion. We tell our youth to get a trusted adult like a youth director for adults it can be the elders of the church or the minister the important thing is that they are not directly involved and all are aware of recognizing any bias.

The third step is bring it in front of a group, the church or the group affected by the conflict. This is invariably a difficult step and a humbling step in our faith lives. We also very rarely get to this point in the church because it is easier to just walk away. But the hurt remains, the people affected remain and sometimes the instigators leaving and not taking ownership solves absolutely nothing.

And that is where the fourth and final step comes into play. Jesus tells us to let them be to us as a Gentile and a Tax Collector. Most of us would do a quick interpretation of this as a way of dismissing or shaming because of course to

those of this time the Gentiles and the Tax Collectors were reviled by the Jewish culture. Throughout the Gospels these were the people Jesus went to and loved in spite of their status he saw beyond the stigma and loved them anyway.

That is how we resolve conflict, we love them anyway. It does not negate the need for addressing it, but it does asks us to consciously see them with eyes of grace and love them anyway no matter what has been done against us as individuals or the body.

It is not perfect but it is a way for us to view conflict as part of glorifying God by agreeing to disagree and honoring one another's differing views and coming together in spite of and as Disciples of Christ often because of our unique understandings of our faith. Remember the end of this section of scripture tells us the simple truth where two or there are gathered in Jesus' name he is here amongst us.