

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"By what name? By what power?"
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Fourth Sunday of Easter

Each of us grew up in a home that developed a certain culture of reaction to conflict. By "culture of reaction," I mean when something was disputed between two parties within the family, whether father and mother or parent and child, or sibling and sibling, or family member and extended family member or non-family member, what happened? In some families, it was expected that there should be a low tolerance to any friction. So even the slightest change into an irritable tone would be unacceptable. In these situations of family conflict, someone would walk away, or simply say that they didn't want to talk about it, or change the subject in an awkward way. These are the family smoothers. A smoother makes sure the appearance of things going well take precedence over other values, such as expression of thoughts or feelings.

By contrast, other families habituate themselves to give freedom to an immediate reaction, no matter how loud or volatile. In these families, it was expected that important issues to discuss would involve raised voices and intense feelings expressed. Swearing and cruel words might also be fair play, depending on the situation. As opposed to smoothing over a matter, the person was expected to confront the other and shouting might be frequent. Now to someone habituated in this camp that is the opposite of smoothing, this cruel freedom seems scary and awkward at best.

I remember as a teenage going to my best friend's house where apparently at least he and his mother had agreed to the cruel freedom model of solving conflict, as opposed to my upbringing of smoothing, except for my father's freedom. I remember my friend Dave, in the middle of a loud argument with his mother about something fairly minor from my point of view, saying something like this to his mother: "Now, Mom, can't you see your shouting is making Jonathan uncomfortable? Why won't you see my point of view and make it is easier on him?" Or something to that effect. I felt like I had been used as a pawn in a chess game where I had not been invited to play. It was a strange moment.

So there are quieter and smoothing families and there are shouting and cruelly freer families. Perhaps yours was a mixture or something in

between. How would you characterize your interaction with your immediate family in times of conflict?

It's good to realize where we have come from, and what our tendencies are. Some of us tend to stuff down our feelings, internalizing and causing dysfunctions within, usually as a result of what we have been taught as children. Others of us externalize and loudly blame others to blow off the steam of conflict and strong feelings. Some of us implode, others explode. Some gravitate to self-destruction. Others to homicide. And many of us are mixtures of both these tendencies.

I wonder how you might describe your family experience and your own personal style of coping. What do you do when you find you are not coping well with a situation or challenge? What would your closest friend, spouse, or co-worker, say you do in such times?

As we turn to the Scriptures again today, we find another situation of conflict. The new faith in the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, does not even have a name yet. The disciples, specifically Peter and John, are teaching the people what Jesus had taught them, specifically about the resurrection of the dead, based on Jesus himself being raised from the dead. Now those who were priests, Sadducees (who didn't believe in the resurrection) and the captain of the temple guards were upset with such teaching, since the numbers of people who became believers in Christ were growing. Dr. Luke, who wrote the book of Acts, actually uses the number of 5000 men had believed up to this point, 2000 more since the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41). We believe there are so many coming to believe in Christ, partly due to the beggar being healed of his being lame, and partly because Peter was speaking so clearly about what it means to trust Christ and to have a relationship with Christ.

So they arrested Peter and John and threw them into jail overnight. On the Temple grounds they had the authority to do this, without any charges. The next day all the rulers were there, including the high priest and his family and associates, and you know the first question he asked the disciples?

“By what power or by what name did you do this?” (Acts 4:7b) The rulers want to get at the centre of what has happened. They probably know that these men are not men of influence, neither are they men of learning or power.

But Luke immediately adds, that although they might not be powerful in the world's eyes, they are full of the power of the Holy Spirit. And Peter speaks powerfully in Jesus' name.

Peter notes first that they have been jailed for a kindness done to a man who could not walk, but now has been healed, not by them or their power, but by Jesus of Nazareth. He also reminds them that this is the same one they had recently tortured to death. Of course, you can imagine that they have already heard the rumours of resurrection. Now they are confronting the power of the Resurrection of our Lord. This is the central thesis of Easter.

And this is something that is not just a historical moment, or an interesting footnote at the beginning of Christianity. This is something we all confront today, now. Do you believe Jesus has conquered death, and in relationship to him you no longer need fear death? Did Jesus indeed rise from the dead? If he did, then he is here. Our faith and trust in Him is as real today as it was 2000 years ago. His power over death and his power to heal are as much at work today as it was in that day.

And here comes the offensive part. "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12) There is no getting around the universal truth claim made here.

Yes, some will say that this kind of truth claim starts wars and kills people. While this may or may not be true, I do not believe it is the truth claim itself, for Jesus himself made the claim to be the Way, the Truth and the Life, no one comes to the Father except through Jesus. (John 14:6) His aim was not to kill or to start wars nor to confront every other religion on the planet. His aim was to offer life and a life giving relationship to everyone who would accept his death and resurrection on their behalf. Yes, I know this is offensive and exclusive as a truth claim. But what are our other options?

Should we deny the uniqueness of our Lord Jesus Christ? Should we say that all religions are true and all spiritual paths are good? Can we deny the uniqueness of Jesus' resurrection and ministry in the history of the world?

This is not the time in history to back down on what Jesus says. This is the time to re-affirm what he says. Yes, some will walk away. Yes, some will be upset with us, maybe even shout at us. Yes, it may be difficult to sustain

trust in the midst of growing antipathy and the possibility of the faith no longer being legal in the public square. The Supreme Court of Canada may force the principle of “neutrality” on all those who speak in government or who speak in public, as they seem to be doing with this recent ruling on April 16, where they ruled in favour of an atheist’s request to remove prayer from the city council proceedings in Saguenay, QC; which may removed prayer from every city council in Canada and every other level of government. And do you know what the prayer was that so offensive? Here it is (as recorded in the 101 page decision in the Supreme Court of Canada):

Almighty God, we thank You for the great blessings that You have given to Saguenay and its citizens, including freedom, opportunities for development and peace. Guide us in our deliberations as City Council members and help us to be aware of our duties and responsibilities. Grant us the wisdom, knowledge and understanding to allow us to preserve the benefits enjoyed by our City for all to enjoy and so that we may make wise decisions. Amen.

If the Supreme Court rules this prayer as offensive, what prayer would pass the test of being non-offensive? We are living in days where we will have to make choices to follow the government ruling, and give up important parts of our faith, or; choose to respectfully disagree with such rulings, and pray and disagree non-violently with those who find our faith offensive and the claims of Jesus offensive.

We will have to choose, first of all, in our hearts, and minds; then, with our actions and words. May God so fill us with the Holy Spirit, that we like Peter and John would speak the truth and obey God rather than the government that tells us to deny what Jesus affirms. And so let us boldly do publicly now what we do at the end of every sermon.

Let us pray.