

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Sticky Issues: Unresolved Conflict"
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How many people here today enjoy conflict? Anyone? How about a good argument? Anyone enjoy being shouted at? Or how about shouting at someone else?

I once knew a pastor in an ecumenical group I was in which had a component of confidentiality because of the prayer and counseling that was going on. This pastor said to our group of forty or so people that he loved conflict, and unless you wanted to see how much he loved conflict, or dealing with it in whatever way he felt led, than you had better respect the rule of confidentiality in the large and small groups. He is probably the only person that I've met who has ever boasted publicly about enjoying conflict.

Conflict is a difficult subject because many of us react to it in unhelpful ways and even those of us who have had training in dealing with difference of opinion and communication skills still struggle in our weaknesses, faults and sins. Conflict also brings up whatever happened in our families of origin.

My father who passed away almost ten years ago had an explosive temper, and could scream and shout as well as swear with the best of them. This was probably due in part, to his alcoholism. Nevertheless, as a small child, I developed strategies to make sure this side of him never showed to me. Of course, my strategies didn't work, but I did develop some tendencies in light of this behaviour. One tendency was a desire to avoid conflict at almost all costs.

Of course, such a tendency is not healthy. But I wonder what things you do when conflict arises with someone you care about, or anyone. What do you tend to do? Do you:

- a) Run away?
- b) Shout back at least as loud?
- c) Pretend like it is not happening.
- d) Try to talk about the weather.
- e) Calmly confront the individual with their behaviour.

Conflict is normal and can be healthy. It is good when another person has an opinion, and is willing to communicate it. It is unhealthy when another person always agrees with you or changes their point of view to match yours. It is similarly unhealthy if this is your tendency. Developing an opinion usually leads to conflict and this is good in the long run.

So there will be times when I will disagree with others and they will disagree with me. There will be times when such disagreements will be over small matters and other times where the disagreement will be over serious spiritual matters. Jesus in the gospel of Luke tells us that there will be times when the good news of the Christian faith will be more like a sword than like a peaceful, serene thing. In fact, Jesus says it will divide families. What I take this to mean is that there will be times where an individual will have to decide between their relationship to God through Jesus Christ, and their relationship to their family. In many cultures, when a person accepts the Gospel of Christ, and gives their life to Jesus, there is a literal or figurative funeral for that individual. Thus the spiritual decision becomes the most serious decision of that person's life.

You and I might not agree on what is essential to faith in Christ and what is not. I would say that the content of the Apostles' Creed is essential, for example, and someone else might argue with me. Each of us makes a decision as we speak with others what we believe in comparison and in contrast to what they believe. Disagreement can be handled in a healthy way, as we seek to understand each other and care for each other.

Disagreement with God is another matter. At the end of time, I will not be your judge nor your advocate. Each of us will face God the Creator. In that encounter, we will be asked if we had trusted Jesus in this life, and what we had done with our life, no matter how long or short. The Scriptures in Hebrews 11 commend those who chose to live their lives for God, who would rather be tortured or killed than give up on their relationship with God, who know that this life does transition into a greater one. The Scriptures encourage us to go against our natural rebellion toward God and to say "yes" to relationship to Him. If we choose to stay in our rebellion and sin, and seek to say "no" to God, insisting we know better, we are on dangerous ground. Trusting in his promise of life and love gives us a taste of heaven on earth.

Now once we have chosen such a relationship, when we have given ourselves unconditionally to God, then we can understand that God is big enough to take our complaints, our concerns, our anger, our frustration and all of what we are. God has the broadest of shoulders. But God also has boundaries and can say “no” to us, even as he has given us the choice to say “yes” or “no” to him. If we choose to say “no” to Jesus we risk our very lives.

If we say “no” to God’s priorities and mission as a church, we can also risk our life as a church. God was saying this through Isaiah in chapter 5. He used the image of taking grape vines from Egypt and planting a vineyard in Palestine. But the vineyard turned out to produce only weeds, not grapes suitable for human consumption. So the owner thought about taking down the stone walls that protect the vineyard and allow the natural predators to destroy that place. This was a warning to Israel in Isaiah’s time. The Psalmist continues this parable with saying that the walls were broken down. I believe these passages are a warning to the Church in our time.

Many churches are closing right now in North America, certainly in Canada, this includes Presbyterian churches. There is a shift in our culture against Christianity which leads many away from church attendance and commitment. We need to be careful so as to not place ourselves as a congregation which no longer believes the gospel, no longer cares about the poor, no longer provides Scripture studies and places and groups for prayer. We need to continually re-commit ourselves to the Mission of the One who gave himself for us.

We celebrate 235 years of existence as a congregation this year in November. Many generations of some families have been a part of this congregation for most of that time. We are grateful for all that God has done for us over this many years.

This is a time for each of us to know what we believe and to grow in our understanding. This is time for us to learn how to disagree well and gracefully, but also to lead each other back to the God who will have the final word on all reality, truth and love.

I am still learning about all this. I was told once that whenever two or more people get together, that that is called “politics.” I have no political agenda that I am aware of in putting forward the above accept to say that what we

do here together and what we choose to do into the future is of great importance. I trust you will take Scriptures and concerns as seriously as I do. I invite your response.

And I recognize that some of what I have presented is with grief and a heavy heart. I would prefer us always to get along, to have a good time. I would shy away from conflict. But that is not the life we have been given, nor the life of any congregation for that matter. And I am beginning to understand my part in disagreements, even though that process is a painful one for me. Let's trust the Lord together for helping us through the difficult times, as well as through the wonderful times ahead.

Let us pray.

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