

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"Creative Conflict"
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Proper 14

Conflict always seems to take us by surprise. Even though I have experienced it to some degree in every congregation I have served, it still surprises me. Even though I have experienced it to greater and lesser degrees throughout my marriage, I'm still surprised by it. Even though I can think back to many instances of conflict with my two older brothers growing up, and with my parents from the earliest years of my memory, I still am surprised.

So I shouldn't be surprised when someone disagrees with me, even if I have presented my case in a calm and rational manner, some individuals will say "no." Rather, I should acknowledge that a part of our human experience is learning to deal with conflict, not always have my way, but rather learn to negotiate and to chart a course of mutually agreed upon behaviour in my relationships and decisions, at home, at work, in the community.

I get surprised when someone on the phone from the city tells me yesterday I should look on the city web site to have found out that the road here on Elizabeth Avenue might be closed this weekend. I would have thought a flyer or a phone call to those businesses and organizations on this street would have made more sense. So I lodged my complaint and realized fairly quickly that the person I was talking to at the city didn't really care about how our services might be affected this morning. That's one example of a kind of conflict.

Other examples are in the Scriptures we read this morning and they present more difficult situations to address in times of conflict. For instance, in John 6, we have people who are experiencing conflict with Jesus because of who he says he is. He is saying that He is the Son of God, the fulfillment of the line of David, the Messiah, the true manna from heaven, about which the manna in the desert after the Exodus was only a symbol and pointer. What does one do when we experience conflict over the identity of Jesus? This is an area that our denomination has chosen to say that we hold firm to the creeds and confessions, historically given to us, the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Westminster Confession of Faith, all were written during times of great conflict. They set up the essentials of who Jesus is as

100% God and 100% human, the second person of the Trinity. And we must hold to what we have received. So when it comes to conflict, there are times when we do not compromise what we believe. This type of no compromise should be on the essentials of the faith.

There are times that seem to be “no win” situations. Most of the time, as Christians, we look for a “win-win” solution to our problems and challenges. As the Scripture exhorts us in Romans, it says, “Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification.” (Romans 14:19, TNIV) But sometimes every option has a down side.

And right at the moment I wrote this, I replaced the concordance I was using on the shelf where I keep my reference works, and as I did, four shelves came down upon me. I said to the Lord, when I am looking for illustrations for a down side, I wasn't thinking so graphically. But now I have re-shelved my shelves and my reference works, and we are back to the point about us sometimes facing situations where every option has a downside.

King David faced this in his household. He knew that he had sinned and that Nathan had foretold that there would be conflict in his household as a result. And so we get to see in 2 Samuel 18 the depth of that conflict. He loved his son Absalom, whose name ironically means “father of peace.” He was David's third son, attractive, a born leader, and yet seems to have been quite power hungry, to the point of wanting to wipe out his father David and his kingdom. So David is unwavering in his deep love for his son even as his son plans and carries out plans to take over his throne by force. You would think that David would be deeply conflicted over the welfare of his kingdom and his people versus the welfare of his son. But he seems to have loved his son so much that he doesn't even care about what happens to his own leadership, throne and the people of his kingdom. In fact, in the next part of the story, in 2 Samuel 19, his General Joab has to confront David with the fact that his whole army risked their lives to take down the army of Absalom. He has to confront him with the fact that he is communicating to his army and his people that he would have wished them all dead, rather than his son. At this point, David comes to his senses, but only slowly.

When we are in a place of conflict, we often find it difficult to hear the other side, to be sensitive to the various positions of the players. This is something we all need to learn better. I do.

In most situations, if we creatively approach them with as much good will toward the other person as possible, we can come out with a mutually acceptable decision. This is not always the case. We live in a fallen world and people don't always care about the best solution for all. Some don't care about God's priorities and the things he cares about. All of us need to work on making painful divisiveness into creative conflict with the possibilities of peace and fulfillment beyond what we can ask or imagine.

The teaching in Ephesians 4, calls us to speak the truth. It allows that we will be angry, particularly in conflict. But it does not allow for an anger that issues forth in sinful behaviour or words. It challenges us to leave behind our temptation to steal from others, to lie to others, to curse against others and against ourselves. Rather Paul calls us to kindness, to tenderheartedness, not hardheartedness, to forgiveness, forgiveness that does not excuse the sin nor minimize it, but places the sinner back in God's hands rather than in our own for revenge.

In short, Paul calls us back to loving one another. This is the highest calling, one that I have much to learn about.

Just in case you're wondering, I'm not aware of any conflict in the congregation at this point in our history. I am aware that God is using this season of blessing to focus our attention on what we want to be and do. If you are aware of conflict or situations that should be addressed, I would very much appreciate your contacting me or one of the elders to directly deal with any situations.

Meanwhile, we trust the Lord for our relationships and for growth.

Let us pray.