

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, fall is among us. The seasons are changing once again, from the green brilliance of trees full of life to the tumble of red, brown, yellow leaves, signifying that it is time to prepare for the next season and next phase. As time draws onwards, it reminds us of who we are and what our calling is on this planet. Holy God, you give meaning to every moment and ask that we do the same. May we be faithful in your sight in how we prepare each day to encounter the vocation of a life committed to the Gospel: a life that sacrifices, a life that seeks growth, a life that wants to be like Jesus Christ in word and deed. Hear what we bring to you, God, and with our commitment, help shape us everyday in that image.

Holy One, you created us differently, with different thoughts, different opinions, different experiences, different lives. We don't always see things the same way. While some would consider this a drawback, as we come to worship, we consider this a blessing. However, God, difference can lead us to conflict, but as you have told us, this is not a sin. How we respond to conflict can be a sin. Help us, with the guidance of scripture, to encounter conflict well: with open hearts and open minds, ready to resolve that conflict for our sake, for the other's sake, for your sake, God of connection and love. We pray all these things in the name of the Lord of Love, Care, and Unity, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray as one people, saying...

## SERMON

I know you're waiting for me to do a sermon. Yes, I'll get to it. I'm going to do it soon enough, OK? No, I'm not angry. I'm doing fine. Nevermind that Jeff didn't greet me this morning well enough. There wasn't enough happiness in his voice. But it's all good. Everything is fine. I will say that if he doesn't come up here and greet me soon, then I'm

going to just go. Why should I tell him? He was the one who messed up! No, I don't need to tell him; he should just know. But, seriously, I'm fine. Just fine. Everything is just great.

It's a bad word, isn't it? Conflict. Someone says something offensive to you. Someone does something you don't like or doesn't do something you expect. Those complications make us react in visceral ways and cause division. Conflict is a bad thing and a bad word, isn't it? No. Conflict is a very positive thing if we handle it well. Ya know what's worse than conflict? The way that we often view and deal with conflict. I grew up in the Midwest, in South Central Nebraska. Conflict exists there, like everywhere else. No one talks about it, but you pick up a clear way of dealing with it. It was never taught to me, but I learned the traditional Midwestern way: avoid it, be accommodating, or be passive aggressive. You can easily avoid conflict; just don't show your true feelings. Don't let them know you are unhappy. Just grin and bear it. You can be accommodating and say, "Whatever you want to do is great with me!" when you have a different opinion. Then you're grumpy, getting mad at others when they don't know what you want to begin with! Then there's the dreaded passive-aggressiveness, when you allude to the other person that you're angry without coming out and constructively saying it. Like, "Hey Jeff, thanks for your loving greeting this morning. It was so nice of you." In all of these situations, was something wrong? Yes. Was I going to discuss them constructively? Nope. Were any of these styles effective? Oh, you'd like to think they were. In fact, I got angrier. To say I had a problem outright was just to make things worse, I would think. Well, over the years, I learned how I dealt with conflict. Now, I see that I absolutely hate those way of dealing with conflict, although I can occasionally fall into old patterns. They say that unspoken anger is like drinking poison and hoping the other person will die. Indeed, that is what

happened with my style of conflict management. Hiding it does no good. Ignoring my opinion was foolish. Passive-aggressiveness wasn't constructive. None made me feel better; all made me feel worse. And, most importantly, nothing changed when I didn't encounter the situation head-on!

If there's one thing Jesus knew about the church, it was that there will be issues. God created all of us differently! Difference is natural, but difference can give rise to difference in opinion and understanding, so there will be conflict. But where we get it wrong is that conflict in itself is not a bad thing. What makes conflict bad is how we deal with it. Let's face it, the church is the hotbed of conflict. The unexamined beliefs that we think we need to be perfect in the church and that conflict is a bad thing lead to a lot, a lot of issues. While there are many things we struggle with in our age, how to deal with conflict is clear in scripture. Let's explore how to live out conflict management...Jesus style as we go deeper on Jesus' instructions and understand why this style of encountering conflict is best for the accuser, the accused, and the entire church community around them, for bad conflict often expands like bad dominos falling.

In this passage, Jesus goes to task with how to deal with these issues well and constructively. "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." Here's the blunt point: if you have a problem with someone, it is YOUR job to point it out. In other words, beneficial confrontation is the first step. You don't go to the next room and pout. One has to go to the presumed wrongdoer and make the issue known. But you have to do it well. It's not, "Hey Jerk, you sinned against me!" It's a constructive conversation where the wrongdoing is laid out lovingly and clearly. You aren't going to spark an attitude of forgiveness if you go in guns blazing and

angry. Jesus lovingly pointed out to his disciples when they weren't at their best; that should be our goal too. You know what it's like when you are lovingly being addressed and when you're demeaned; that's the focus when we address one another in conflict.

If that solves the issue and everyone feels complete, then great! That's what should be done. Conflict has gone its perfect course as the issue was address and resolved. Hopefully, that is the way it should go with the followers of Christ, but we don't live in a perfect world where we are always perfectly attuned to one another. There arises the times when an agreement cannot be reached or the conflict escalates. Jesus clearly continues with more direction. If the one who has been accused of wrong does not listen to the wronged, there is a further course of action. Jesus says, "If you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses." Let's get Jesus clear here: this is no gang-up on the accused. This is not passing along gossip or trying to get others on your side against an evildoer. If that's the focus, that's not conflict resolution. This is trying to find reconciliation, not a winner, with objective observers. But the one accused of wrong may not cooperate there either, and Jesus has more instructions: "if the offender refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." This also needs to be put into context: once again, it's not about ganging up on someone; it's reminding them that this is a community. What affects one, affects all, and if we are not striving to do well by one another, then we all are diminished. Not "Get it right," no "I think you're making a big deal out of nothing," it's "let's come together to resolve this well." A church community should be committed to finding the best for everyone, not taking sides, dismissing, or faultfinding.

Our lives, our communities, our worship requires that we solve our conflicts as best as we can. Indeed, we cannot worship well when we are angry, when we are troubled, when we cannot make peace with our brothers and sisters. I heard recently on an episode of “On Being” with Krista Tippett why we pass the Peace of Christ. It is not solely for greeting your neighbor. You have plenty of time to catch up with each other before the service. No, we pass the peace of Christ with each other before we get to the heart of worship. We pass the Peace of Christ because we pass peace with one another; we want to dismiss grudges among all those in our church. Indeed, if you remember our first scripture from Matthew 5, it gets to the heart of this matter: “when you are offering your gift on the altar,” when you are worshipping, “if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come to offer your gift.” Holding grudges and keeping anger in our hearts disrupts our worship. It makes it very difficult to worship God when we are busy being angry at someone else or we have not reconciled with those we have struggled with. Don’t let your passing of the peace go to waste with just a greeting; let it be a time when we remember we are people of Christ.

However, a stubborn person may not want to come to an agreement. Jesus says, “if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.” It sounds like a dismissal, but it’s not so. Jesus is not saying, “Let such a one be to you an outcast.” How often does Jesus say, “Well, you are totally not worth my time?” The whole of scripture does not show Jesus as someone who’s gonna declare you a lost cause, even if you need forgiveness 77 times 7 times. In fact, the passage immediately preceding this one speaks of how a shepherd will go looking to find the one sheep out of his

flock of 100 that goes astray. What this passage is saying is not that Gentiles and tax collectors are to be rejected but they are objects of mission, according to the New Interpreter's Commentary. We have to treat them in love and remind them what a life of love in Christ looks like, for a community is diminished when we reject one another.

The bottom line of Jesus' message is this: if you have a problem with someone, if you feel that you have been wronged by another, addressing the situation is your responsibility. It's not their responsibility; it's your responsibility to make it known. It's loving. It's for their good, for your good, and, ultimately, for the greater community's good. It's not the time to fall back on good ol' Midwestern conflict resolution that I often fell prey to. Expecting the one who wronged you to just figure out that you're angry won't help anything; in fact, they may not even know that there is an issue! The honest thing, the loving thing, the thing that is best for you is to address the problem well, as Jesus lovingly instructed. It's not that there's a conflict; it's how we address it.

Today, tomorrow, sometime this week or very soon, you will have a conflict with another person. No matter how hard we try, it is inevitable. How Jesus instructs us to respond not only makes biblical sense, it makes life sense. Conflict is a not a bad thing, and Jesus never calls it bad. What he does make clear is that there is a good way to deal with conflict and a bad way. The good way is to go to the one you feel wronged by and make it known. The wrong way is to pretend like nothing is wrong or just don't make your opinion known when it is asked for. That does no one any good at all. When we resolve conflict well, we grow stronger as a community: a community that loves one another, a community that serves one another, a community that worships God. Thanks be to God for the wisdom of how to live well with one another, especially when we differ. Amen and Amen.