

**What is being revealed about conflict in our divided world
Conflict – blessing or curse**

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Text: Acts 15:1-11, 36-41

Galatians 2:11-13

What is being revealed? What is being revealed about conflict in our divided world? You may be really wondering about my title for this sermon. Conflict – blessing or curse? Can conflict really be a blessing? Isn't conflict always bad? Isn't it always a curse.? We don't like conflict. We avoid conflict at all costs. How in the world can conflict be a blessing?

Right now, the conflict in our world – especially the political turmoil and crazyness south of us, is almost terrifying. Right now, the divisions between the so called “evangelical” Christians and all other Christians is both mystifying and dangerous. Right now, the context for dealing with “Covid 19” is bristling with disagreements.

Given all that, I would like to begin in the personal sphere, and from there go the systemic sphere. For most of us, conflict is both personal and systemic. Lydia and I have had our share of conflict in our marriage. Lydia is a Neufeld. They are a very extroverted family that argues everything out – loudly. And yet love each other deeply. I am a Harder. We are much quieter by nature, introverted, – and inclined to be conflict avoiders.

I had to learn to “fight back” in our marriage. And Lydia had to learn to listen to my quieter voice. And it has worked. We love each other and challenge each other - and grow together. Yes, we do sometimes get upset with each other. But that never breaks our relationship. We challenge each other a lot – well, maybe she challenges me more than I challenge her. She will probably dispute that.

Conflict is not a bad word. It can be an opportunity -an opportunity for growth, for new insights, for a new way of looking at things. But conflict can also destroy relationships and even destroy a church. It can be a blessing, or it can be a curse. It all depends on what we do with conflict. Do we run away from it, avoid it at all costs in order to preserve peace, and so keep conflict

simmering away under the surface. That would have been my temptation. Or, do we attack the other side, the other person, so forcefully that it becomes a win/lose fight we are going to win at all costs, regardless of the consequences? Or is there another way?

(Dr. David Schroeder back in CMBC days had some wisdom here. He said “If you have a big disagreement with someone, there could be three possibilities – The other person could be right and you wrong, or you could be right and the other wrong – or you could both be wrong. In other words, you have only a 33% chance of being right. That reminds us to have some humility about our claim that we have the truth on our side).

If we can learn to deal with conflict interpersonally – in ways that respect the other and builds that relationship, perhaps we can apply that same perspective to conflict in the public sphere?

Conflict in the New Testament

The New Testament church was riddled with conflict – and survived and grew. Some of the conflict was what I would call “substantive conflict”. That is, disagreements about really big, important issues. But some of the conflicts were interpersonal – people just getting angry at each other. I want to look at a few texts of each of these kinds of conflict.

A) Substantive conflict – disagreeing on major issues

1) Including Gentiles in the church.

The biggest issue facing the New Testament church was the struggle to Include Gentiles in the church – This was a massive, divisive, struggle – a huge conflict. It is Peter, a very reluctant Peter, who receives a vision from God which opens his heart to go to the house of Cornelius, the Gentile. There he acknowledges, “I truly understand (now, after my vision) that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him”. And then Peter baptizes all the Gentiles in that

household. This is an absolutely momentous change – for Peter and for the Jewish followers of Jesus – and for the gentiles now baptized.

But Peter reaps massive protest, massive resistance, for doing so. Chapter 11 of Acts tells that story. “So, when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him.” This conflict is dividing the church.

We turn to Acts 15, the so called “Jerusalem Conference” where the church is gathered to try to sort this out. The story starts this way. “Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, ‘unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved’. That is the conflict, starkly named. “And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissention and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.”

I chuckle at the description. “no small dissention and debate”. I can just imagine. It must have been very hot and divisive. So, they convene a big conference to hash this all out. They go to Jerusalem where other Jesus followers have gathered. They grab hold of this major conflict and argue it out. They faced the conflict head on. I suspect it was a loud and vigorous and spirited and maybe even angry discussion.

But in the end, they do come to an agreement, an agreement that has a bit of a compromise in it. They refer to their scriptures - and realize that even there they found an opening to gentiles who were seeking the Lord. If you really look for it, you can find other places in their Scriptures that showed an openness to the Gentiles. Think, for one example, of Ruth, Ruth the Moabite who is named in the lineage of Jesus. But they had to be reminded of this. They had conveniently overlooked these stories. But they now saw what the Spirit of God was doing among these Gentiles – gentiles like Cornelius. “We will include them”, they decide, at the end.

The early church of Jesus has undergone a massive, massive change to openness to Gentiles – all this amidst huge conflict and debate – a debate which will be revisited many times. Its not as if this settled it for all Christians for all time. But, resolving this conflict did lead to huge church growth.

Imagine that! Dealing openly with conflict leads to church growth

2) 1 Corinthians 14 – The worship wars

Another huge substantive conflict in the church at Corinth was around how to worship. One group was really big into speaking in tongues and going into ecstasy and being very spirit filled. Another group liked worship that was quieter, more rational, thoughtful and instructive. This conflict was tearing the church in Corinth apart. Paul's challenge and advice? Vs. 14 is the key. "For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays but my mind is unproductive. What should I do then? I will pray with the spirit, but I will pray with the mind also; I will sing praise with the spirit, but I will sing praise with the mind also." He is bringing together the two sides of the conflict.

I don't know how fully Paul's advice solved the worship wars dispute in the church at Corinth. We don't really get a full answer to that – except that this letter was included in the Scriptures, which suggests that the church there probably did listen to Paul. My hunch though is that the challenge of bringing head worship and heart worship together was ongoing. As it is for us. Our Mennonite churches know something of this worship divide, this polarization, this attending more to the head or to the heart.

Our own church stories

What about our own church stories of substantive conflict?

Rosemary Mennonite

As a teenager growing up in the Rosemary Mennonite church, I was becoming aware of two rather major conflicts in my home church. One conflict seemed to be about who the really important people in the church were, who had power, who were listened to, and who wasn't. Later I realized that this had something to do with how well-off people had been in the Ukraine. The "landed" people, those who were well off there, kind of looked down on the "landless", those who were considered poor. Somehow that carried over from the Ukraine to Canada - and impacted our church life in Rosemary.

The second conflict was much more visible. In the late 1950's, just as I as a young teenager was becoming aware of these things, a huge "evangelical wave" swept across our churches. Now we had big time evangelists bringing huge crusades to our churches, insisting that we were still sinners and needed to be "born again" – born again dramatically. We needed to have a dramatic,

public conversion experience to make sure we were really “saved”. A large group in the church welcomed this new emotional enthusiasm saying it brought new life to the church. Another large group – my parents among them – were less enthusiastic, a bit sceptical, wondering why a more personal, perhaps quieter faith in Jesus, wasn’t enough.

My home church, Rosemary Mennonite, has always had a lot of conflict. I am sorry that it has recently left Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church Alberta to go its own way. I deeply grieve that. I wonder whether my home church has learned how to process conflict in a healthy way.

TUMC

We have had significant substantive conflict in TUMC. – Certainly around building our beautiful building, and also around “inclusion” I don’t want to make any other comments on them other than to suggest that, despite how painful these conflicts were at times, we emerged from both of them as a stronger church in the long run.

Maybe, but very crucially, we realized deep down, that our worship of God through Jesus was more basic, more important, than were our untested convictions and our prejudices. We prayed, we confessed, we lamented, we cried. It seems to me that TUMC is a much stronger, much healthier congregation now. I think that is what happens when we let God do the healing, when we are open to change, and when we name our conflicts as less important than our corporate worship of God.

B: Interpersonal conflict

I turn from Substantive conflict to interpersonal conflict – to times when we don’t get along with each other, get angry at each other, and sometimes break relationship with each other. In the family. In the church. In the community.

Again, we have many stories from the New Testament. We have many stories about our heroes of faith who are in conflict with each other.

We just need to scroll down to the end of Acts 15 – right after the church makes that huge breakthrough regarding Gentiles that we just talked about.

“After some days Paul said to Barnabas, ‘Come, let us return and visit the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing’. Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work. The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of God” (Acts 15:36-40).

I suspect that Paul was a bit bullheaded, too sure of himself, probably very hard to work together with. There is another telling story told in Galatians chapter 2. By this time Paul and Barnabas have mended their quarrel and are working together. But now Paul tears a strip off of Peter.

“But when Cephas (Peter) came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came with James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy” (Galatians 2:11-13). Wow. Harsh, harsh words. And this about Peter, someone on his team. What is going on? Is Peter really kind of backsliding, caving into pressure. Or is Paul overly arrogant and critical? Or are both somewhat at fault, and they can’t find a way to compromise? It seems that neither of them took the conflict management course.

Peter is the longer time leader of the early Christians, the mature, wise disciple of Jesus who was the key figure in bringing Gentiles into the Christian church. Paul was the newer convert, on fire for his new-found faith in Jesus. He was far more educated than was Peter. What was going on here? Does the power each of them has threaten the other?

The seeds of conflict

Let's look a bit more at some of the seeds of Inter-personal conflict – in New Testament times and in our times. I want to look at two roots causes of such conflict – power imbalances and low self-esteem.

1) Power imbalances – unhealthy systems of power

Some people always have more power than do others – for a variety of reasons. It just is. Parents have more power than their children. Teachers have more power than their pupils. Employers have more power than their employees. Long term church members have more power than more recent members. Until recently, men had more power than women. We “whites” have more power than do people of colour. The educated have more power than those less educated. The wealthy have more power than those who are poor – just look at the graphs of where Covid has hit the hardest in Toronto – yes, in the poorer communities. Heterosexuals have more power than do homosexuals. Conflict is built into these power imbalances in almost every institution, including in the church.

One of the huge challenges of pastoral ministry for me was how to acknowledge the power I had been given by the congregation, but not to abuse it by insisting that I get my way. How could I “lead” without putting other people down. How could I use my power to empower the congregation, and yet not allow the congregation to abuse me? Clearly there are pastors who abuse their congregation – we have very recent MCEC stories about this. But there are also congregations who abuse their pastor. It was a long, long learning process to come to terms with my power as pastor - and to try to use it in healthy ways. It took me a long time to learn not to shy away from conflict, but rather to try to open it up for conversation. Its okay to get angry. It's okay for others to be angry at you. It's not okay to put down another, or to silence another, or to abuse someone.

Those of us who have more power – because of any of the reasons already named – have the immense responsibility to share power with those who have less of it – encouraging, really listening, affirming, respecting. This doesn't mean “giving in” for the sake of a superficial peace. It means being dialogical. It means being open to the other. It also means challenging systemic inequalities.

One of the challenges here is that we are often not aware of the power that we have. Other people may see us very differently than we see ourselves.

We may see ourselves as having little influence while others may see us as being too influential.

But what about those who feel that they are on the margins, that their voice is not heard, that they have little influence, little impact in any discussion? Partly it is up to the church to encourage those who are timid, and perhaps afraid, to speak their truth and to enter the conversation. It is up to the whole church to listen to every voice, to encourage everyone to really enter the conversation.

Sometimes there is abuse even in the church. Always that needs to be named and challenged. Power imbalances do exist. Our goal is to hear all the voices, particularly those who may feel vulnerable.

2) Low self-worth

There is one more piece to this dialogue thing that I think is very important. That piece is how we feel about ourselves. It has to do with our self-worth, our self-concept. If we feel good about ourselves, if we feel loved, if we feel our worth as a child of God, then it is much easier for us to be open and dialogical in our discussions – and not to be so threatened by honest conflict – and not needing to win at all costs.

Most of us struggle with this at one time or another. But those who have experienced abuse or trauma often feel particularly vulnerable and unable to speak – and may need loving encouragement to enter their voice.

It is when we struggle with our own self-worth – when we feel weak inside, feel inferior, powerless, unheard, that we find disagreement so threatening. Then we tend to do one of two things. One temptation is to withdraw. I will just lose anyway. What's the point? Nobody will listen to me. So, we stay quiet – and simmer away inside. But that doesn't feel very good. We feel defeated even before we enter the conversation.

The opposite temptation is to mask our inferiority feelings by speaking too loudly. We push too hard to get our way. We silence the other voices by shouting them. We will try to win the argument at all costs. And the cost is high.

When we don't feel good about ourselves inside, our temptation is to either shout too loudly or to withdraw into sullen silence. Neither opens dialogue. Neither builds community.

The thing is, the church is a community. Win-lose fights destroy community, as does withholding our voice. We want everyone in the church to feel empowered, to feel God's love, to feel valued and listened to. Those of us who feel a sense of empowerment – and I would hope this includes everyone in the church – we are empowered by God's love – those of us who know ourselves to be loved by God don't need to yell, don't need to overpower others. We are freed both to speak and to listen.

Speaking and listening. That makes for a healthy community.

Conclusion

What is being revealed to us? The Jesus whom we follow did not avoid conflict. He spoke truth to power. He listened to the marginal voices. And he changed the world.

