

The title of my sermon this morning is *Conflict Resolved* - and I know what you are thinking. Why is he preaching about conflict? Is there something going on that we don't know about? The answer is no. When it comes to being a church family that reaches out to others, Providence is the best church that I have ever seen. The reason that I am preaching this sermon is because this is our lectionary passage, which means that this is what I'm suppose to preach about. Secondly, this is part two to the sermon I preached last week on forgiveness. And third, I think that the best time to talk about conflict is when there is no conflict. That way we can all relax and learn from the teachings of Jesus. If we don't know how to resolve conflict, then eventually there will be conflict – even in the church.

Years ago I was serving a small congregation and one Sunday morning I asked for prayer concerns. A man raised his hand and said, “You can pray that my wife will get sweeter.” His wife was sitting beside him. She took her purse and hit him right there in the worship service. I said, “Are there any other prayer concerns?”

One day I was visiting a friend who is a pastor. I went to his office and saw a prayer kneeling rail. I said, “Why have I never thought of that? A prayer kneeling rail is a great thing to have in a pastor's office.” I asked, “Do you use this before you go into worship?” “No,” he replied, “I use that before I go into meetings.” I said, “Oh, having some difficult meetings, are we?” He said, “John, you don't know the half of it.”

Years ago I was in an Administrative Council meeting when things started heating up. You could feel the emotional temperature of the room rising. So, I sat there wondering how long should I let this go on and at what point should I intervene. Then the matriarch of the church beat me to the punch. She stood up, pointed her finger, and said, “Look, we are all going to have to get along when we get to heaven, so we might as well start working on it now.” Then she sat down. I could have hugged her. We all know that there are times when people have conflict. There are times when people get upset and times when people get their feelings hurt, even in the church. How do Christians resolve conflict? That is what we are going to talk about for a little while this morning.

Let's begin by recognizing that different people have different patterns for dealing with conflict that they have developed over their lifetimes, and often we bring these patterns into the church. For example:

David Johnson - in his internet article entitled *How Do You Resolve Conflict at Work?* - said some people are turtles. Turtles hide from conflict by withdrawing into their shells and you can't get them out until the conflict is over. I think of Sergeant Shultz from the old television show, *Hogan's Heroes*. Sergeant Shultz would say, “I see nothing, I know nothing.” Some people are turtles.

Some people are sharks. Sharks look for conflict. Sharks try to overpower their opponents in order to win in the midst of conflict. Do you know anyone like that at your work place? The opposite of sharks are Teddy Bears. Teddy Bears want to hug and say, “Why can’t we all just get along.” Some people are foxes. Foxes try to outsmart a situation in order to get the best possible solution for themselves. Finally, some people are owls. Owls are wise. They do not try to overpower conflict, nor do they try to avoid conflict. Rather, owls want to work through conflict to achieve win-win resolution.

Turtles, sharks, teddy bears, foxes, and owls (oh my): these animals are in your families, they are in your workplace, and I suspect that you will find them in our church. Because when we come to church, we often bring with us patterns for dealing with conflict that we have developed over our lifetime. But this morning I want to talk about how Jesus taught us to deal with conflict.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew, verse 15, Jesus said: “If your brother or sister sins against you go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have gained a brother or sister.”

Notice that Jesus has no instructions for those who do what is wrong. As a Christian, if I have done something that is wrong to you, I am going to apologize with all my heart, ask for forgiveness, and try to make things right. That is a forgone conclusion for Christians. But this verse addresses those who have been wronged. You say, “Wait a second. I didn’t do anything wrong. He is the one who did it. She is the one who said those things. They should be the ones who come to me.” No, that is not what the bible says. Jesus said, if YOU have been hurt, offended, or sinned against, YOU go to the person who has done this and begin the process of healing.

Friends, this works. It is so simple that you have to wonder why conflict is such a big part of our lives – just go to them and talk with them. But this is so opposite of our human nature that most people will not do this. When someone does us wrong our tendency is to withdraw, pull back, or avoid them. Or our tendency is to get angry, hurt, or bitter. Our tendency is to talk to anyone who will listen except for the person that we need to talk to.

Years ago I was having lunch with two friends; one from Ohio and one from West Texas. My friend from Ohio said, “I just can’t get over how friendly everyone is in the South. People wave to me, they say ‘hello’, and they say ‘have a nice day.’ I am amazed at how friendly people are in the South.” My friend from West Texas said, “They are not being friendly, they are being polite. People in the South will say, “Hi, how are ya’ll doing. It is so good to see you. Give us a kiss.” Then they will turn around and say, “I cannot stand that woman, she drives me crazy and she gets on my very last nerve.” Then we will go home and say, “You will never believe who I bumped into today...” We will talk to everyone around the situation except the person that we need to talk to in order to resolve the situation. Jesus said, “...go to them. Talk to them. If they listen, then you have gained a brother or a sister. But what if they don’t listen? What if they don’t want to work things out? Then you go to step two.

Verse 16 says, “If he will not listen, take one or two others along... as witnesses.” Why do we do this? Hebrew law says that you have to have two or three witnesses to uphold a complaint (that is Deuteronomy 19:15). But more than that, when it comes to conflict resolution, sometimes it helps to have a third or fourth person to work things out. I may be wrong. You may be wrong. Let’s get someone else to help us work this out.

Verse 17 says, “If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.” I’ve only done this a couple of times and it was always concerning issues of church policy. Sometimes good Christians disagree with the way things should be done. If we can’t work it out, then we take it to the appropriate committee and finally to the Administrative Council. That is what our Administrative Council is for. But what if they will not even listen to the church? Then you go to step 4.

Jesus said: “...if he or she refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a gentile or a tax collector.” How did Jesus treat gentiles and tax collectors? He reached out to them. He offered the Kingdom of Heaven to them. I think that in verse 17 the Lord is saying, if you go through this process – if we talk one on one, if we talk again with witnesses, if we take it to the church, and someone still refuses to resolve the conflict, then we need to pray for them, reach out to them, and offer them Christ.

But it is usually not going to get that far. When it comes to conflict in the church, more often than not, it is usually resolved in steps one or two. Usually, all you have to do is talk to them. Why? Jesus said, “Where two or three come together in my name, there I will be also.” We usually hear that verse out of context. “Are we really having church if it is snowing outside?” “Jesus said, where two or more are gathered in my name, there I am also.” That is true, but it is not the context in which Jesus said it. Verse 20 is talking about conflict resolution. Where two or more are sitting at the table talking over coffee, where two or more are working out their differences, where two or more are making peace with each other in my name, “I will be there,” says the Lord.

So, I was praying about this and I asked myself; “Is there anyone in my life that I’m having conflict with?” I thought, “Nope. I’m good. It’s all good with me.” Then I remembered *there is someone*. It happened years ago. He did me wrong and it involved the church. And the more I thought about it, the more I experienced residual feelings. I knew what I had to do. I looked up his phone number and I called him. I won’t kid you. It was about the most awkward conversation that I’ve had in a long time. He said, “Hello.” I said, “Hi, this is John Fitzgerald” and there was a silence. “Wow”, he said, “that is a voice from the past.” I asked, “How are you doing?” We made small talk. I knew that if I was going to follow Matthew 18 I needed to talk about what he did to me, but how do you do that constructively? In the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Galatians, Saint Paul said, “If someone does wrong, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness” - the operant word being *gentleness*. So, I did not say, “The reason I am calling is because I am preaching on Matthew 18 this Sunday and I need a closing illustration and I’m pretty sure that you are going to be it.” What I said was, “over years I have felt some tensions between us and I don’t want that to be the case so I’m calling because I would like to work it out.” He said, “I would like that also.” And the most

amazing thing happened. We talked. At the end of the conversation I invited him to a football game (we both pulled for the same college team). We were bumping calendars. We were talking like brothers. I said, "I'll get the tickets you get the popcorn." And just before I hung up the phone he said, "Hey John, thanks for calling." I said, "Yea. It was good talking to you too."

Conflict resolution is a good thing. The 18<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew really works and it is a wonderful feeling to be able to go to sleep at night and honestly say "It's all good. Thank you Lord. It is all good with me." On the surface it sounds so simple – all you have to do is talk. But after experiencing it, I think it is more than just talking. Jesus said, where two or more are making peace in my name, there I will be also. Thanks be to God!