

“The value of conflict” a sermon based on Matthew 18:15-20 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 6 September 2020 by Kerry Enright.

There are times people wonder why a certain sermon is preached. What is going on that prompted the minister to say that, people wonder. At other times, people imagine that a sermon is directed at “certain people”. They look across the aisle to see whether the people to whom the sermon is evidently aimed are listening to it. So let me make a disclaimer. The gospel reading set for today is about conflict, and that is the reason I am speaking about it, not because anything is happening we don’t know about or because I want to pick on someone. In relation to the text, many commentators note that this passage is not meant as a template for resolving all conflict. Following these steps as if they were law will not necessarily produce a favourable outcome and may be harmful and hurtful.

Every day we are conscious of destructive conflict. Trump’s America. Wars that roll on - South Sudan and Syria. Tensions at the Khyber Pass. Closer to home, ongoing harm from previous conflicts - The New Zealand Land Wars. There are dynamics that will not go away - gender based violence. And in the church we are not immune. The second congregation I served had a large number of people leave during a previous ministry and when I arrived people were still bruised and anxious and afraid and angry. One supporter of the previous minister was so caught up in the conflict that she sent me a letter after I had been called but before I had moved, saying there was no way she wanted a Marxist, feminist failed lawyer as her minister. We all have war stories and when we dig them over, what dark places we go to. And COVID-19 has added to the stress. And so has social media.

Jia Tolentino, a staff writer at The New Yorker identified five intersecting problems created by the internet: First, how the internet is built to expand and extend our sense of identity; second, how it encourages us to overvalue our opinions; third, how it maximizes our sense of opposition; fourth, how it cheapens our understanding of solidarity; and, finally, how

it destroys our sense of scale. “The self-deluding dynamics of modern digital life highlight how the internet’s success is partially built on its ability to kindle the flames of human conflict.” Rage sells.

Is there anything good about conflict? The church was born in conflict. Conflict runs through its story, often arising over what seems trivial today. The issue of whether Christians should eat meat that had been offered first to idols. Whether Gentiles should be allowed to convert to Christianity without being circumcised first, whether Christians should marry, whether Christians were bound to keep Jewish law. At the time these conflicts must have seemed painful, that the church was coming apart at the seams, that it was a hopelessly divided and fragile movement without a future. And yet.

Jesus generates conflict. Living with conflict is a major part of how we exercise our discipleship. Conflict is an expression of the life of Jesus among us. Joan Tucker and Joyce Gray say “Some of the key doctrines of our faith were forged in the fire of these early controversies. In fact, almost every important facet of Christian belief ... was a matter for conflict in the ancient church at one point or another.”

The book of Acts could be understood as a story about conflict. There were differences of opinion and practice, but the church was not destroyed. It often became stronger. Acts 6:1-6, for example. Christians provided food for destitute widows. The Greek-speaking members complained that the Greek-speaking widows were not getting as much as the Hebrew-speaking widows. This put pressure on the apostles who were busy enough already, preaching the gospel and making disciples. That led to what became the order of deacon in the church, one who provides food for people who are hungry. And, records the book of Acts, the word of God increased and the number of disciples multiplied.

Although we don’t always notice it, much conflict is very positive. Let me start near home. Every month I look forward to our Church Council meeting, a meeting of people selected to govern and guide our congregation. To which you might say – Get a life! You look forward to a church meeting! Why? Well, significantly because a group of people seek

to grapple with what they believe to be important, from different perspectives. The differences help make the discussion life-giving. People from different generations, with different faith experiences, cultural backgrounds, personality types and more. We have learned that what some find utterly logical, others find bizarre. So we have to talk and listen. In focusing on issues and not people, we grow together. In many ways, the differences make the difference.

We seek to live out the call of Jesus to unity which is not uniformity. We seek to be faithful. We believe the Holy Spirit is working through the process of conflict to bring about the will of God. Painful as it can be, conflict can help the church grow and become more creative in its life and ministry. In many ways, our Presbyterian system is a system for living with conflict. We are guided not by individuals but by councils, people talking and praying and working together to discern what is of God. We have a system of accountability so our local council is overseen by a regional council, and the regional council is overseen by a national council. We are not meant to exist in our own bubble and make our own rules and dissolve in our own juices. We can imagine that cutting ourselves off reduces conflict, but it generally means avoiding the underlying issues.

Years ago I attended the Assembly of the Church of Scotland. The Queen's representative that year was Lord Mackay of Clashbern. He told a story of a ship-wrecked Scotsman washed up on a desert island. Years later the Scotsman was discovered. He took his rescuers on a trip around the island and they were surprised to find two churches. Two churches?, they asked. Ahh yes, the Scotsman said, this is the church I attend and this is the church I would never set foot in. My friend told me some background to the story. Lord Mackay had been a member of a conservative Presbyterian Church. And he was also Lord Chancellor, the highest elected judicial figure in the United Kingdom. In this role, he attended the funeral mass of a Lord Justice who had died. Because he attended a Roman Catholic mass, Lord Mackay was excommunicated by his church. A man of deep faith, he found his spiritual home in the more inclusive Church of Scotland.

Conflict is more likely to be healthy when it is framed by our common commitment to Jesus. When we meet, we believe God is in the room. “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” In Council we start our meetings with a Bible reading and reflection and prayer. We are reminding ourselves that none of us is the final authority. None of us sees all or knows all. It nourishes humility. We could be wrong.

Healthy conflict has value. It is an important part of an active, life-giving congregation. It is an important way we discern God’s will. It challenges some of our patterns. It broadens out our perspectives. It can elicit growth. If we see it as a way we live out our discipleship, then we can learn to practise it well and to learn how to thrive with it. May it be so.

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