

Conflict in Community
The Monroe Congregational Church
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
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Acts 15:1-21

Jesus never said it was easy to be a disciple. At least he left them tools to work with, friends and community to share the sacred work, rules intended to build up the community. It's not that surprising that one of the very first conflicts in the early church was about who was in and who was out. The apostles, disciples and elders had to decide whether to stretch the body to include those who did not share their religious heritage, or draw a sharp distinction and create 2 levels of membership: Jewish Christian and Gentile Christian.

Scripture says this caused no small amount of tension, as more and more of those Gentile newcomers began showing up to worship and participate in community. The tension morphed to outright verbal conflict, with everyone picking their side of the debate. The conflict was important enough for Antioch to send a delegation to Jerusalem to try and settle it once and for all, which seems like a very expensive way to come to a decision. Eventually, as the story goes, the early church settled on grace, mercy and inclusion as shared values.

To be honest, I am conflicted about conflict.

On the one hand, I know from experience that some measure of disagreement can be healthy. When conflict is managed from a place of love and respect it can become an impetus to change. As people come together, discuss their differences with warmth and empathy they might learn something important. Reconciliation has a sacred quality when it helps us to restore relationships. Friendships can heal. Marriages can be saved. Partnerships can be strengthened.

On the other hand, conflict also carries with it the possibility of becoming entrenched, abusive, long lasting and soul crushing. I was reminded this week of the infamous Hatfield and McCoy's family feud. You may or may not know it began in 1870 as an argument about which of the two families owned a particular hog. What could have been managed as a tiff between neighbors became a decades-long family war, with many acts of violence

committed on each side. PF learned this summer that to this day it is still being grumbled about by modern day descendants living on the Kentucky/Tennessee border!

Transforming conflict can sometimes feel darn near impossible. I want to believe that humanity can pull together to create a new, sacred world where there are no enemies. I want to believe that we can come to some agreement on the big issues that seem to fracture and divide us. But I'm not so sure anymore. The Cold War has been over for almost 30 years, but we're still afraid of Russia. Democrats seem to be the sworn enemy of Republicans and vice versa.

Is there something in our humanity that requires us to have an enemy, a scapegoat to blame, or at the very least someone to disagree with? I wonder.

Jesus taught that humanity could expand beyond hatred and conflict into a state of justice, peace, and love.

But it's not just Jesus who speaks of this. Most world religions try to get us to step out of the hating our enemies and into loving them. This is not an easy task for those of us who haven't yet reached the Buddha's enlightened state, or felt something of Jesus' personal connection to the Creator, or had flow through them Gandhi's inward peace that led him to non-violent protest.

Their ideas about love were radical and stood in the face of political and economic powers that saw the need for enemies, scapegoats, and continued conflict. Seeing love as a power greater than the Empire eventually got Jesus, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr., among so many others, killed.

This "*love your enemies*" thing that Jesus talks about so much is difficult. Remember the beatitudes? "*Blessed are you who are reviled and persecuted for righteousness sake.*" I think Jesus was speaking to any one of us trying to expand our love toward those with whom we are in conflict.

Love your enemies. That doesn't mean work on changing them or even necessarily agreeing with them. Love means that you see their humanity at its core and understand that we all share something in common, even if it is not ideology. Love their humanity so that together you might collaborate on bringing God's kin-dom to reality.

Collaboration can only happen after we see the simple similarities both sides can agree on. Of course, this means that both must be willing to even sit in the same room together. What do we share, what is it about you that is the same in me?

A conflict over resources means that we might need to stop talking about ownership and instead focus on our shared values. If we can't agree on our values, then maybe we can agree on our identity as children of God or that we are both part of something greater than ourselves.

And if we can't quite get there, we might go back to the basics and just take time to breathe. At that point, we are biological beings needing the same thing—air to fill our lungs and flow through our blood bringing fresh oxygen to the whole body.

Studies show that deep breathing lowers blood pressure, reduces the fight or flight instinct, and gets us into a more peaceful frame of mind. One of the pastoral counseling tricks I've used with struggling couples is to have them look into each other's eyes for five minutes in complete silence. Their bodies will do something extraordinary, they will start to breathe in sync with each other. Afterwards, couples report feeling hopeful that whatever they were struggling with can be worked on as a team.

Next time you are locked in battle with your significant other, try it!

In fact, I'll bet you can love someone – anyone - at that level.

In a deep and profound way, this can help us to see the other as human, not just as our adversary. Which can help us step out of the need to win the competition and be right.

At our core, we share biology, the need for oxygen and water and food and shelter.

At our core, we love our children (both our biological ones and the ones we encounter in this community).

At our core, then, maybe we can agree not to hurt each other, out of love for our children.

At our core, we might remember that you are beloved of God, just as I am, and God's love is not a scarce limited commodity owned by one person or group of people; it is an abundant, impartial, ever-expanding, miraculous gift that is our responsibility to share.

It is all too human to want to call forth our enemies to try and challenge them, change them, win the argument or hurl out a good insult. But when we do, it's a challenge to our faith.

We gather each week in this safe harbor, for an hour or so, to rest in the peace of God's love. I don't know about you, but I need a safe place where I can drop anchor, away from the fiery storms of Facebook and Twitter and the evening news, away from bickering partisanship, scapegoating and sworn enemies.

The good news is that all of that isn't the way that God wants things to be. Once, we were fractured by resentment. Once, we defined ourselves by fear. Too often, we still do. But we are God's people and we have been made to be so much more. In Christ, we are *already* so much more.

Our human tendency towards division is strong, but the roots of our God's love is stronger. Through the power of the gospel, we come together as one, as a people knit together by the experience of God's grace. Once we were strangers, but now we know that through God's mercy, we can treat one another as sisters and brothers.

And because we have received mercy, it is incumbent on us to show mercy to others. Like Peter, Paul, Barnabas and James insisted, we have been freed to love those people whom the world in all its divisiveness tells us every day we should hate. That love doesn't make our differences and disagreements fall away, but it allows us to hear each other despite them. Simply put, we can refuse to be enemies.

Yes, that's pretty counter-cultural. Even fantastical, and maybe just a little naïve. And it certainly takes work. Real work.

It would be so much easier to ignore the people with whom we have fundamental disagreements, to avoid them at all costs and cover our ears. It's a challenge to honor the humanity of those who might not recognize the humanity in us. It's much harder to journey alongside people who have a different understanding of the world than we do. But the God who called us out of depths and into the light empowers us to be a place and a people to take just this on.

Monroe Congregational Church, how are we, together, going to put LOVE to work? Amen.