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The Jesus Way | Conflict

Philippians 4:1-9

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The early churches dealt with a fair amount of conflict. Paul addresses that conflict with calling each of them to show gentleness. God is not far off but actually near to us all. How can we show more gentleness even through our conflicts in our churches, in our homes, in our relationships, because God is near.

My first job out of college was a position in a Lutheran church in Faribault MN. I was responsible for creating and leading ministry opportunities for kids 4th – 12 grade. The only training I had was my own experience growing up in a church youth group, my experience teaching swimming lessons as a lifeguard and my four years as a camp counselor during the summers through college. What I found out was that my experiences equipped me well for being a youth director. Lots of energy, creative ideas, I knew how to gather groups of kids of all ages for some big time fun and spiritual growth all at the same time. Kids were awesome.

What I was not prepared for were the adults. I'm not just talking about the parents but all the other adults and the adulting stuff that was going on at the church. I remember talking to a good friend of mine who had the same role as I did in a different church about how nuts the adults were. All of their agendas. All of their power plays. How mean they were to each other. I remember being in a meeting where the choir director and the senior pastor were about to physically fight – they were nose to nose shouting at each other. Red in the face – if I had looked closer, I bet I would have seen steam. And then there was the time at a church council meeting when the council was about to strip the senior pastor of all his programmatic responsibilities, and give them all to the other pastor, and I'm sitting on the outer ring waiting to give my youth director report – stuff like how much fun, excitement and spiritual growth was going on with our youth – and I'm sitting next to the senior

pastors wife who leans over to me and says "Have you ever seen a pastor's wife slap someone?"

Ah... am I supposed to answer that question – is it rhetorical? Should I warn anyone? It felt like at any moment Hulk Hogan was going to burst into the room, rip his shirt off and start throwing chairs. At one point the council decided to take a break and I went up the president of the congregation and asked if I really needed to be in that meeting – the youth stuff was going great, and I really didn't want to see that stuff. He cut me loose.

But as church would have it, over the years, I've been in many more of those kinds of situations. Conflict is a part of life. No matter where or what setting or situation we will find ourselves in conflict, because where people are present, conflict will be present too. But I don't think avoiding conflict is the solution. Avoidance just leads us to twisted weird places like passive aggressive behavior. I also don't think seeking conflict is healthy either. There are lots of people out in the world looking for a fight that really doesn't need to happen. We see this unfolding in our politics all the time. But what about those times when conflict is inevitable, people have differing goals, different perspectives and life experiences, different expectations, different values, and people find themselves under all kinds of pressure in life. Where I grew up in south-central Texas many people just think differently than many people in Woodbury MN. And it's none of our faults, but what we can do is work to be as healthy as we can in the midst of conflict. This includes our relationships, our workplaces and in our churches.

The Apostle Paul knows this really, really, well. Paul had planted a church in a town called Philippi, which was named after Phillip II who just so happened to be assassinated some 400 years before Paul and whose son would come to be called Alexander the Great who is considered one of the great conquerors in all of history. And with a conquering army comes a conquering culture as well. This one was Greek culture which smashed headlong into Jewish culture creating all kinds of conflict. And 400 years later here comes this guy named Paul - who had overcome his own conflict

with Jesus and is now calling both Jew and Greek to faith in Jesus. More and more conflict. Let's hear what Paul has to say to a church in Phillipi.

Phillipians 4: 1-9

¹ Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. ² I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.

³ Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. ⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

⁶ Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸ Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

So Euodia and Syntyche are not getting along. What is going on? They have been called out by Paul. Named in the letter, for all eternity will these two women be known as troublemakers? Rabble rousers? Instigators?

It sounds a bit more complicated than that though. First of all Euodia's name means "sweet fragrance", and Syntyche's name means fortunate. There is a fight between sweet fragrance and the fortunate one. Awesome. Sweet fragrance and the fortunate one are not getting along. And we do not really know what the conflict is all about. All we can do is read the context of Phillipi, first century early Christian church pressures and take a guess. Was one a more conservative Jewish hardliner and the other a more Hellenists progressive. The hardliner would have been super critical of Greek behavior. We are talking basic stuff what foods can be eaten,

who can hang out with who – all that stuff. Maybe one of them supported Paul and his teachings and the other did not support Paul and his teachings. Whatever the conflict we do know that it was developed from a place of pride, selfish ambition, and a spirit of rivalry. They were engaged in a power struggle to increase their influence over the church.

And Paul returns over and over again to identity. Who are you? Are you in Christ or are you not in Christ? Paul says, have the same mind in Christ. And Paul writes with urgency as this conflict was spreading like a virus through the church, threatening the church itself. These two were willing to burn it all down if they didn't get their own way. It's why he takes the deeply harsh step of naming them. He calls them out for their own ambition.

However, Paul also reminds them and everyone of their earlier commitment to the cause. Euodia and Syntyche were both critical to the birth of the church. Both of them, whose names are in the book of life worked side by side with Paul and his other coworkers. Clement was one of the more well know ministers as well. In other words... these two women had deep faith and commitment to Christ. But now they are battling over who is more faithful than the other. Who is more right than the other.

We've seen this time and time again – in our time as churches have struggled with issues and we all see this in our personal lives. We see this in our relationships with our partners and spouses. Our relationships with co-workers. Our family relationships. And Paul says there is the way through. Have the same mind in Christ. Focus, Paul says all your thought on Christ. Not on who is more faithful or who is more right, or who is to blame, but on Christ. This is to focus on humility and servanthood. Paul's plea is for them to have the same attitude that Christ expressed on his way to the cross. Total humility, servanthood, complete sacrifice... for what? The good of the gospel. What is the gospel... what is the good news... that God is gathering up – all things into Christ. God is in the

redeeming, restoring, reconciling business and these two people are getting in the way.

And it is obvious that Paul didn't think these two would be able to work it out on their own. The sweet fragrance had gone sour and the fortunate one was... well... not so much. So, Paul sends in the big hitter. He calls this person his "loyal companion" which is most likely Timothy. He sends in Timothy to help them... however the word help in English is a bit weak – Paul uses a word that conveys a physical action: to seize, to grasp, to apprehend, to catch and take hold of together. This is the same verb that is used in the arrest story of Jesus in the gospels. This was seizing with intent. The gospel is at stake. Whatever their grievance was... it pales in comparison to the purpose and mission of the church.

And then Paul sets the table on how this conflict is to be resolved. These are his dear friends. This church is Paul's joy and crown. Amazing. The temperature needs to come down Paul says. Let's rein in the rhetoric here. Slow the roll Paul says. But how do you do that when both sides have already built up a head of steam. First of all, stop rejoicing in whatever arrows you are slinging. Stop rejoicing in your arguments and start rejoicing in the Lord. And it's not just a call to be happy. No... rejoice in the Lord for your own salvation has been given to you not because you earned it or deserve it. Rejoice in the Lord who has been amazingly, even foolishly generous to you. Rejoice, because you couldn't save yourself. God has. This is Christ's work. Your pride and selfish ambition can't and won't save you. Rejoice in the Lord.

And then Paul doesn't leave them hanging. Paul gives them the road map to work through it. Gives us the road map to seek healing in our church, in our personal lives. Paul tells them to remember to be gentle. Your gentleness is not just reserved for your family, friends or for those who agree with you. Your gentleness should be seen by all. And what does this gentleness mean – "not insisting on every right of letter of law or custom, but yielding, kind, courteous and tolerant." Aristotle – who would have greatly influenced Paul says that the gentle person is "the one by choice and habit does

what is equitable, and who does not stand on his rights unduly, but is content to receive a smaller share although he has the law on his side."

And Paul says – for every person in church who has truly known the power of grace – because of that knowledge – their rejoicing is seen as gentleness. Wow! And then Paul leaves them with and remember – the Lord is near! Remember what this is all about – it's not about you, your righteousness or your rightness, but it is about your identity in Christ.

Anyone have chills yet?

So how does this work in our lives... especially with the hyper polarization we are in? First, in all things know that the Lord is near. Trust that the Holy Spirit is working in you and in the other. God is with you – not on your side, but with you. There is a difference. Second, be gentle. You can feel like you have every right to lord your power over others, or your grievance over others, but gentleness is not a weakness, it's a choice. Gentleness is something you can make a habit of which retains your power in much more deeper ways. You can choose to humble yourself. Third – take some time to recognize the other. Euodia and Syntyche stopped seeing each other as faithful people. They both were faithful. I grew up in a small Texas town that in some areas have very different values and priorities than what I would have now. It doesn't mean they are not faithful. Recognizing the other as holding their values allows others to begin a conversation not from anger but from an acknowledgement of who they are. And then, there are times when you need the heavy hitter in the room. Sometimes we all need to be taken ahold of and called out for our pride and selfish ambition. Who can you go to talk things out. What third voice. What Timothy can you call upon to come along side in the struggle.

I wasn't there at the end of the meeting, but I am pretty sure I would have heard if the lead pastor's wife had slapped someone. And I bet if we all could go back and look at that situation, we'd all be a bit embarrassed, probably a bit sad and we'd all have something to learn. Actually, I wish we would have

called in Hulk Hogan as our heavy hitter. Because after ripping off his shirt and throwing a couple chairs he'd probably sit down and say, "Okay guys what I do is put on a show". This is all for a show. What I do is fake. The show you're putting on isn't worthy of the grace that you all been given through Christ Jesus. Remember, who you are. Remember that you are all brothers and sisters in Christ!"