

***A Courageous Life: Courage to Address Conflict***  
14<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost, Year A ~ Matthew 18:15-20  
Welborne UMC ~ September 10, 2017  
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Courage is one of my favorite things to think about. I may not always demonstrate it well, but I ponder it a lot. If you peek into the space above my computer in the office you will see quotes like:

“Be audacious”

“It takes courage to grow up and become who you really are.” –ee.cummings.

I ponder courage a lot because my life’s journey has taught me that becoming who God has called us to be really is a courageous act. It is a courageous act because it involves becoming our true selves, in a world that more often than not invites us to play pretend—to pretend competency, intelligence, confidence, and a host of other things when we are quaking and fragile inside.

Jesus was not a pretender. He was a courageous, authentic person, who challenges all of us to become the same kind of person he was—a person who prays. A person who has authentic relationships. A person who cares about justice. A person who serves. A person who is steeped in the scripture. A person who is called to be in the presence of God, and listen to God. If we follow Jesus we are called to all of that. And if anything in this world requires courage, it is living like Jesus.

So, if we are Christian, then we are called to live courageously. And I don’t mean take ridiculous risks—but just show up with all that we are. This scripture today addresses one of the places where we must show up courageously, and that is in places of conflict.

This passage makes me chuckle a little because Jesus is predicting in it every church fight that ever was or will be. I say that because when he makes this statement, that “if another member of the church sins against you,” he is making a prediction. The church didn’t exist during Jesus’ lifetime, you see—the church was not born until after the resurrection. Yet, somehow Jesus knows that the body of Christ which will emerge as the church is not going to be perfect—it is going to have it’s struggles, and there is going to be conflict.

Not only does Jesus assume conflict will be a natural part of life in Christian community, he also assumes that we are going to deal with it. Not ignore it. Not bury it. Not keep quiet about it. But deal with it. And it is that assumption which can be very challenging, because we humans can be very different when it comes to our approach to conflict.

In fact, I’ve been jokingly accused of liking conflict. Now, truthfully, I don’t know anyone who likes conflict. I had to do a little conflict management late this week and it made me feel angry and anxious and frustrated. But it had to be done. And while I don’t like conflict, I

learned long ago that it is better to face conflict in healthy, life-giving ways than to ignore it and let it fester. So, I have taken steps to understand my own conflict style and how I can use it productively.

Conflict style is something we often talk about in leadership training, and one of the instruments for evaluating and understanding conflict style is the Thomas Kilman conflict mode instrument. Now, we aren't going to administer the instrument this morning, but I want to briefly talk about the kind of conflict management styles it outlines, and invite you to think about your own style—how you tend to handle conflict.

In order to do that, you are going to need to call to mind a conflict you've had recently. Doesn't have to be a big one—could be a little annoyance. Think about how you dealt with it. Then, as I describe these styles, think about where you might fall on the spectrum.

The Thomas Kilman conflict mode instrument measures our conflict style along two spectrums: cooperativeness and assertiveness. The cooperative spectrum focuses on the extent to which we try to satisfy the other person's concerns in conflict. The assertive spectrum focuses on the extent to which we look after one another's concerns in conflict.

So, people who have very little motivation to look after their own concerns, or anyone else's, avoid conflict. Avoiding is accomplished by changing the subject, ignoring the conflict, or stepping out of the situation. In some ways, avoiding is easy, because we don't have to engage in difficult dialogue when we avoid. We just leave.

Those with an accommodating style don't look after their own concerns, but bend over backwards to make sure that other people's concerns are addressed. There is an element of self-sacrifice in this mode, as accommodators always yield to the views and needs of others.

People who are of a competing style always chase after their own concerns—often at the expense of the other person. Simply put, people who are competitive conflict managers try to win at any cost to the other.

Compromisers are moderately cooperative and assertive. They look out, to some degree, for the needs of themselves and others, working to find a swift solution which at least meets somewhat the needs of both parties. Compromisers are willing to sacrifice something for themselves and for others in order to resolve the conflict.

Collaborators are those who don't want to merely settle for compromise—with some wins and some losses. They want to dig into an issue, understand underlying motivations and work to find new, creative solutions for conflicts. Collaborators are the persons who, when presented with a conflict where we must choose A, B or C, try to come up with options D, E, and F as well.

Did you hear yourselves in any of those? We actually are all capable of exercising any of these styles, but we tend to prefer one or two. It's interesting work to think about—but far more interesting is to think about the kind of style Jesus might be inviting us to follow in this scripture. So, what does he say? If you have a conflict with someone in the church (and I would also add in the world—because this works beyond the walls of the church), Jesus says you should:

1. Go to the person directly. Point out what the conflict is. No witnesses, just you.
2. If that doesn't work, bring two more people together with you and repeat the process.
3. If that doesn't work, bring it before the whole community, and if that doesn't work, treat them as you would a Gentile and a tax collector.

A reminder here—how did Jesus treat Gentiles and tax collectors? He treated them as beloved by God. He extended grace to them. So this scripture does not say that we are to throw out the people who do not agree with us. Rather we are to love and care for them, understanding that on this issue, we do not stand in the same circle of agreement.

So, as we think about how Jesus invites us to handle conflict then, Jesus asks us to be courageous. He asks us to not ignore the problem, to not merely accommodate others, to not wildly exercise power or authority we may have, but to engage in dialogue and discernment together. Jesus invites us to be compromisers and collaborators. And that work requires courage. It requires courage to engage in relationships and conversations that we KNOW will be difficult. It requires courage to open ourselves up knowing that we might be wounded.

Why does Jesus ask us to do it that way? At other times he says, "turn the other cheek," right? But when we are Christians living in community together, we can't always afford to turn the other cheek because the conflict will eventually destroy our community. Rather, Jesus invites us into relationship. I have witnessed time and time again that when we are in relationship, when we sit down across the table from one another, there is something amazing that happens—it's called reconciliation. Reconciliation happens when we stop targeting one another as the problem, stop judging one another, stop wanting to punish one another, and we realized that the problem is the problem. And the only way we can solve it is by working together.

I had the chance this week to spend some time with Rosemary Thomasson. Rosemary is a member of our congregation who is 94 years old, and on the table in her sunroom was a puzzle in process. She was down to the sky part. You know the sky part. All hues of blue, all looking alike. She asked me, before I left, to help her, to just solve one piece. I studied for a while, and I was able to put one piece in. She shook her head and said she'd been looking at those pieces forever.

Most of the time resolving conflicts and reaching reconciliation is a little bit like working a puzzle. One writes says to imagine that your problem or conflict is

“like a box of jigsaw-puzzle pieces somebody just dumped out onto the table. Silently, unwilling to speak, the [people in conflict] start to examine the pile. Each one sees some pieces that fit together and connects them up. The two combatants bend to their work, creating little clusters of puzzle pieces -- a bit of sky here, a patch of grassy lawn there, the red siding of a barn over there. Eventually, they connect those larger clusters.

Before that happens, though, the two get up and start walking around the table, to get a different perspective on the emerging picture -- or maybe to pick up a stray puzzle piece, to see if it belongs to the section they've been working on. They may even start talking to one another -- imagine that! "Hand me that piece of blue sky over there."

Eventually, it no longer makes sense to speak of "my side" or "your side" of the table. There's only The Problem -- and it takes [at least] two parties, working together, to solve it.

"Us versus them" has got to be transformed into "Us and Us." It's the only way reconciliation ever happens."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus knew that. That's why he invites us to have the courage to engage in relationship with those with whom we are in conflict. And if the conflict can't be settled with one or two or three, he invites the whole community to work on it, and to keep working on it. He invites us to treat even those we are most exasperated with as Gentiles and tax collectors—people that Jesus loved and welcomed into the Kingdom despite their faith learning curve.

May we have the courage to be a community who addresses conflict in loving, honest ways in our own lives, and in our life together. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Unhackable Key,” [www.homileticonline.com](http://www.homileticonline.com), September 10, 2017.