

QUARRELING AND CONFLICT

Sermon 880

September 14, 2014

14th Week after Pentecost

963rd Week as Priest

790th Week at St Dunstan's

55th Week at Epiphany-Tallassee

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Quarreling over opinions, and conflict among the faithful, are the two primary issues in today's lessons for this Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost. But I'm not sure if these are actually different issues. Rather, they may be two sides of the same coin.

We know that even the Church is not spared quarreling and conflict. If you look back at the history of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, you find that quarreling and conflict have always been there in the Christian community. Not all the time, and not in all congregations, but quarreling and conflict have been unwelcome neighbors in most of my church experience.

And that was certainly true in Paul's experience in the Early Church. Every single congregation he visited, and every new church he founded, had troubles with quarreling and conflict. Every single letter he wrote—with the exception of the Letter to the Philippians—was an exhortation to right action, and to reconciliation. Paul knew the danger that division meant for the Church, and he acted decisively to resolve problems. That was true in his day, and the same situation persists in ours.

In 2003, the conflict was over human sexuality, and it seems that the quarreling is far from over. People have very strong opinions about homosexuality and gay marriage and they are willing to have their differences divide them forever. I must ask you, whatever happened to the kindness and mercy that were hallmarks of Anglicanism? What happened to our time-honored tradition of tolerance? We have almost always been a church of diverse opinion and wide variety. But not always, and not recently.

In the 1960s, the issue was civil rights, and the Church was torn in two in many towns and cities of the South over segregation, integration, and discrimination. Those differences are not mended entirely to this day,

although the laws of our land have helped to make America a freer, more just, and fairer nation.

Those are national issues, but Episcopalians haven't always needed to argue over the Big Picture. Congregations have divided over building programs, stewardship plans, the furniture, and especially over the ministers.

When we lived in Fayette, we saw a Church of Christ split three times over music. The Baptists were legendary in having a group of people get mad and move a few miles down the road to start a new Baptist Church. That's why there were 16 Baptist churches along the 32 miles of highway between Fayette and Gordo.

A parish I served some while back is left with just a handful of people today because they have fought tooth and nail over everything from buying a new organ, to running off the latest priest, to moving a hutch to a different place in the parish hall. One small group after another has left, until they are down to fewer than a dozen—and they still argue and quarrel among themselves! It is simply not Christian behavior.

One of the bishops I have served over the past 18 years said that congregations sometimes suffer from an institutional memory that they won't, or can't, let go of. They hold on to an old division, an ancient hostility, and the quarrels surface each time one of those "hot buttons" is pushed.

That's enough of the bad news and sad state of affairs to give you a clear picture of the problem. But what to do about it? That's the direction I'd like to take.

Once again, the Holy Scriptures point the way. Not like a GPS, but as a reflection of the love of Christ. Paul reminds us that God welcomes everyone to be a part of our community, not just those who are like us. And that we are called to show hospitality, not judgment, to all who join us in worship and fellowship.

Last week, Jesus gave us a way to settle disagreements—private conversation, intentional peacemaking, and submitting ourselves to the wisdom of the vestry, and the final decision of the entire church. Now he tells us to forgive, and forgive, and forgive. Seventy-seven times!

And if we are unwilling to forgive and to be reconciled, then we will face God's judgment. I should say that forgiveness is something you may have to do with clinched teeth. It may be more a case of *letting* yourself forgive than demanding it.

And reconciliation? Well, that means coming to terms with the way things are—not pretending that the wrong never happened, and not acting like everything is sweetness and light. No, reconciliation is the hard work of being realistic and recognizing that you can't change anything that has been said or done, but you can put it behind you, and you can start living in a new way—without holding onto a grudge, without reliving the wrongs done to you, without dredging up the past every time you think of that person, or people, who did you wrong.

And one last thing. I don't think any of this is possible without confession and absolution. We have to admit our own sins and omissions, and we must ask for forgiveness. We cannot be reconciled if we hold on to anger. We cannot find peace with others if we demand our own way. We are called to be in unity and community with each other, and in right relationship

with God. This is a good day and time to ask the Holy Spirit to direct and rule our hearts in this way. **AMEN.**

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