

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
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Philippians 4:1-9 (NRSV)

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.

TWO WOMEN WITH A PROBLEM

There are two women in the church who are causing problems. Most of you know who I'm talking about. These women are hard workers. They have been instrumental in starting and supporting many of the important programs in the church.

But, now they are at odds over some issues that they think are important. It's become the number one topic of conversation in the church, and quite frankly I'm afraid that their disagreement will harm the work that we're trying to do.

I wish that I didn't have to talk about such things in a sermon. I'm sure most of you would rather hear about something else today. I know that I would. But, the time has come to let the whole church know what's going on. It's time to name names and tell the unvarnished truth.

What are their names? Why, surely you've heard of Euodia and Syntyche?

Before you try to look those names up in the church directory, let me remind you that these were the women who were disturbing the peace of the congregation at Philippi long ago.

Paul, in one of his more positive and joyful letters has (up to this point) written eloquently about the great theological promises of the faith. And then, in this letter that was read to the whole congregation, he brings up this problem, this petty disagreement between two women in the church.

It seems so out of character with the rest of the letter that some scholars have even suggested that these verses are a fragment of some other "lost" letter to the Philippians.

But, I'm not convinced. Paul was never one for subtlety. If he had a problem with someone, he would just blurt it out. Quite often Paul's abrupt manner

would alienate him from fellow Christians. In my opinion this is just another example of Paul's very blunt manner.

Couldn't he have done this in a more discreet way? Can you imagine how surprised these women must have been when they hear their names being read aloud in church? I wouldn't have blamed those women if they had just walked out of church when they heard that they were being singled out in such a public way.

One of the cardinal rules in many churches is that you never, ever air your dirty laundry in public. The petty problems of the church should never be a topic of conversation in a sermon.

We save those discussions for the parking lot!

And maybe that's why we have so much trouble. Perhaps, the problem between Syntyche and Euodia does have a place in our theological discussions. Maybe we ought to think about why we have such petty, vicious arguments in the church. Is it because some people never grow up?

I guess we could argue that those who participate in such arguments are just small minded people who don't have the love of Christ in their hearts. Surely, we're not like that. Of course we wouldn't stoop to that level.

Unfortunately, that's not true. There's a bit of Euodia and Syntyche in every one of us. Even the best of us can let our pride or thoughtlessness get the best of us.

I think it's important to note that these women were effective leaders in the church. Women had always been leaders in the church at Philippi. From the very beginning when Paul met with some believers led by a woman named Lydia, this had been true.

Paul refers to these women as loyal co-workers. They struggled side by side with Paul and the other leaders in the church to preach the gospel.

And that's why their feud was so destructive.

I am amazed how this often happens. Even today some of our strongest leaders can also at times bring about such destructive conflict.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

I think I may have mentioned that I attended a conflict management training session this past summer. The leader asked us to think about some times in the Bible when there was conflict in the community of faith. As we mused on this together we came to the conclusion that conflict is a vital part of the biblical story.

In fact, from the Exodus, to the Exile, to the cross and to the founding of the early church, there is no way to talk about the Christian faith without telling the story of conflict. The sixty four dollar question is not, "How can we avoid conflict?" Conflict will inevitably be a part of life, and conflict will especially be a part of the life of one who dares to be a disciple of Christ. Jesus said as much to disciples. If they persecuted Him can disciples of Jesus any better treatment. The answer is "no."

But, conflict is not limited to those outside the church who would oppose the ministry of Christ. There is conflict within the church as well. If you're in church today because you want to be in a place where "never is heard a discouraging word" you're in the wrong place.

Now some might say,

"It shouldn't be that way. It's one thing when we're reviled for preaching the message of Christ; it's quite another thing when we are reviled by fellow Christians over a disagreement. Why do we often hurt the ones we love? Why do we have such strong arguments in the church?"

The church never has been nor will it ever be a calm, peaceful place. The church is a place where we strive to do the will of Christ. And since we will disagree from time to time about what Christ calls us to do and be, and since

we are only human, we will have conflict with our brothers in sisters in Christ.

Let me say I think it is okay to disagree with fellow church members. I think it is okay to debate the fine points of the faith in a very vigorous way. In fact I think that debate is necessary. It helps us all grow in the faith and say more precisely what we believe.

What is destructive is when those debates turn into personal feuds. Apparently this had happened with Euodia and Syntyche.

So, it is not reasonable to ask how we can avoid conflict. At best we will only stuff strong emotions deep down inside until they explode at a later date.

No, the most important question is “How can we manage conflict?” How can we disagree with one another in a way that helps us grow together in Christ instead of being pulled apart by petty squabbles?

Paul encourages the Christians at Philippi to help these important leaders, Euodia and Syntyche, to put aside their differences.

And I think that he gives them (and us) a kind of blueprint for resolving conflict.

WORSHIP

First, he asks them to worship together. Paul told the Philippians, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.” (Philippians 4:4-5)

Worship fills us with joy and makes us aware of the Lord’s presence. When the Lord is near, it becomes a lot harder to nurse a grudge.

When I was in seminary, I had a very intense disagreement with a professor. He was normally a very mild mannered man, but in this case he was very upset with me and I with him. He was also my advisor, and I was afraid our relationship would be permanently damaged by this angry encounter.

Immediately after our close encounter of the angry kind, he was scheduled to preach in chapel. I really didn't want to go to chapel after our blow-up, but for some reason I felt compelled to do it.

During that worship service I found the grace to pray for him and to pray about the disagreement that we had. Several days later he said in his typically abrupt way, "Are we okay Mr. Allen?" And I replied, "We're okay."

Those were just a few brief words, but I could see on his face that those words had deep meaning. I think he knew that I was praying for him that day, and it changed the nature of our relationship.

The first step in resolving any disagreement is to worship together, pray for each other and affirm what we have in common. Quite often the most intense conflicts can be diffused by simply rejoicing in the Lord. As Paul put it, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice."

DEALING WITH ANXIETY

The second step in resolving a conflict with a fellow Christian is to find and deal with the anxiety that we have about a situation. I have often found it helpful to ask people who are feuding, "What makes you afraid in this situation? What is the worst that could happen?" Sometimes when people who are feuding find that they have the same fears, it sometimes makes it easier to manage the conflict.

Angry people are almost always fearful people. And anxiety makes us behave in unpredictable ways.

A friend who is a counselor recently attended a workshop in which a famous therapist stated that fear is the basic problem behind almost every negative emotion. Thinking back on my own life I can see how this is true. My anger is almost always attributable to an underlying fear. In order to get rid of the anger, we have to first must rid ourselves of the fear.

So how do we do that? How do we get rid of our deep seated fears that control our behavior in sometimes undesirable ways?

At first it seems like Paul isn't much help when it comes to anxiety. He simply states, "Have no anxiety about anything." When it comes to fears, Paul wants us to "just say no." He sounds a lot like Dr. Phil!

It might make good television, but that response is not very helpful to a person who is afraid. Those of us who have faced deep anxiety know that it's just not that easy. Persistent anxiety is one of the most difficult psychological problems we face, and it's hard to get a handle on our fears.

Technically speaking anxiety is that gnawing sensation at the pit of our stomach, that fear we cannot really name. And telling an anxious person to "have no anxiety" is almost like telling a dog not to bark. It won't do any good!

But, Paul does more than just tell us not to have anxiety. Paul tells us to replace that anxiety with two things, prayer and thanksgiving. Bring your problems to the Lord in prayer. But, don't just bring God a wish list. Pepper your prayers with thanksgiving and praise.

Many of you are familiar with an acronym concerning prayer, ACTS. It is a way remembering the important parts of prayer. "A" stands for adoration. "C" stands for confession. "T" stands for thanksgiving. And "S" stands for supplication or asking for things. When I'm teaching about prayer, I remind people that the order is important. We should ask for God's help only after we have praised him, confessed our sin and counted our blessings.

In a conflict situation, quite often people only focus on what they lack, on what is going wrong in their life and in the church. This way of looking at things makes problems look a lot worse than they are, and it makes fertile ground for conflict.

Paul tells the church, “Count your blessings instead of you problems. Take your problems to the Lord and leave them there.” That might be the hard part, leaving our problems with the Lord.

Many of us have a tendency to think too much. We go over and over a problem in our minds. And the more we rehearse the problem the bigger it seems to become.

The promise of this passage is that God will help us overcome this tendency to rehearse our problems. Paul told the Philippians that if they bring their concerns to the Lord, the Lord would guard their hearts and minds with “the peace of God which passes all understanding.” God’s Spirit would keep their hearts and minds focused on God’s will in Christ instead of their own fears.

You’ll notice that when I pronounce the benediction I often use this phrase. I know that all of you go out into a world that is filled with many fears and conflicts. I want you to remember that Christ goes with you. I want you to remember that there is a peace that is stronger than the fear and the conflict. I want this to be my last word to you because it is a word of supreme hope.

THE POWER OF POSITIVE THINKING

This past week I was on a church committee that heard from a fellow minister who has been struggling with cancer. The church that he serves has been struggling as well, and they were asking for a grant from General Assembly to redevelop their church. We asked this minister about his personal struggle and the church’s struggle and he replied,

“Right now I’m cancer free. The doctor said that if I had the kind of cancer the tests said I had, I would not be here right now. So, the only thing he

could say about it was that the tests must have been wrong. It must be a different kind of cancer!

I don't know what the future holds for me or for this church, but we're both going for broke. We're spending all we have in faith. After all doesn't our confession say that 'in life and in death' we belong to God?"

I couldn't help but admire and be inspired by this minister's faith and the faith of his congregation in the middle of great difficulty. Yes, they had problems, big problems. But, they had learned to focus upon a peace that was greater than any problem they might face. They were trusting in the promise. They were trusting God to guard what they could not control. They were living what we all confess, "In life and in death we belong to God."

I sit on a Presbytery committee that often has to deal with conflict in the church. It can be very discouraging. Like Rodney King I ask at times, "Can't we all just get along? Especially in the church it seems like we should do better."

But, then I hear a story like this, a story of great courage and faith. And I say to myself, "More people should know about this. We should somehow learn to focus more on these positive stories than on all the problems we face."

It's like the question some of us probably asked when we watched the evening news on TV. Why do only the bad things make the news? Why do we have to emphasize what is wrong so much? Isn't there some good news to report?

Paul would agree with that analysis. It is important to focus on the good news. In fact, as most of you know, that's what the word "gospel" means, good news.

The third and final solution for an anxiety filled conflict is to focus upon the solution instead of the problem. It sounds a whole lot like Norman Vincent

Peale's book, "The Power of Positive Thinking." How do we overcome conflict? We focus our minds on the positive.

Paul wrote,

"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." (Philippians 4:8)

There was a book a while back that proclaimed, "You are what you eat." That's true. If we feed our body junk food, we won't be healthy. And that's true psychologically and spiritually as well. "We are what we think." If we brood upon problems and what is wrong in our life, we will be dour, sour and disagreeable.

On the other hand, if we focus our minds upon stories of faith and hope, we too will find faith as well.

In a church I attended in Charlotte, NC, they had a brief film clip before the worship service started. In it a woman told how the ministry of that church had meant so much to her and her family.

I thought, "That's a really good idea. By focusing upon what was right and praiseworthy, the whole congregation was encouraged to do even better."

Today's story from the Bible is about a feud that took place long ago between two women with names that are almost impossible to pronounce. But, all of us know that the story continues even today. There are people in every church who focus on the negative, causing conflict and harming the cause of Christ.

According to Paul, our job is not to criticize those who are this way. Our job is to help them overcome this problem through joyful worship, prayer and a positive witness.

And in a time of high anxiety, we will indeed offer them and the world a peace that passes all understanding.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN