



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

"When Two or Three Gather..." - The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost - 9/6/2020

In the name of the loving, liberating, and life-giving God. Amen.

Since we reopened here, to some degree at least, we've been doing weddings again. And so I've been busy with premarital counseling that we always have the couples go through. And our program, the one that we use always begins with having them take a survey. The survey is meant to help them identify areas in their relationship, which as we like to say, could benefit the most from some growth, finances, children, family expectations, that sort of thing.

And in my experience, the one that always seems to come up most is communication and conflict resolution. That's kind of the other side of the coin. And it's always a bit surprising to me, but it's also a reminder that even people who are madly in love, who are getting ready to commit their lives to one another, even they can struggle with basic relational skills, like asserting their needs and sharing their feelings.

And if they can struggle with it, what does that say about the rest of us? How good are we at confronting others when they hurt our feelings or wrong us in some way, when they let us down? How good are we at confronting not just our partners or our spouses, but our friends, our coworkers, fellow parishioners?

And if you have any doubt about this, just ask yourself when was the last time somebody said something that hurt your feelings and you remained silent? When was the last time you found yourself complaining to someone about something someone else did? When was the last time you secretly defriended somebody or stopped following them on social media because of something they posted? When was the last time you found yourself no longer really hanging out with someone that you used to because of an opinion that they might've shared?

These kinds of moments happen all the time, don't they? After all it's perfectly human, I think, to want to avoid conflict, to choose flight over fight. In fact, it's so normal that we have these cultural names for them, don't we? Have you ever heard the term Minnesota nice? That's where when someone says something that insults you or wrongs you in some way, you just keep smiling, you just keep smiling and be as sweet as you can be. Until you get into the car, that is, and say what you really think about them. Or if you're from the South or if you know folks

from the South, when someone crosses the line down there, what do you say? Well, bless your heart. Bless your heart. I love that one.

And since we're talking about passive aggression here, let's not forget about triangulation. That's where, when someone comes to tell us about how upset they are about something someone else did or said. Instead of us saying, whoa, wait, stop right there. Don't tell me, you need to talk to them. Instead of saying that, what do we do? Well, we get out the popcorn, you know, pull up a chair. I don't want to miss any of the details here. Oh, and by the way, I might have a few to share with you about them as well. In fact, triangulation is so common. I actually challenge you to try to get through the day when either you're not being triangulated or you're not triangulating. It's that commonplace. You have to almost pay attention carefully to even notice it.

And the problem of course, with all of this, and we don't need a premarital counseling session to tell us this, but the problem is one of the great paradoxes of life and of human relationships, and perhaps even our faith is that avoiding conflict is actually the most reliable way to drive us apart. Think about that. Conflict is still relationship. When you're in an argument with somebody you're still in the game, you're having a rough patch to be sure, but you're struggling together. You care enough to try. And so you still have a chance to come out on the other side perhaps more trusting and closer than you were before.

In fact, the Mennonites see conflict as the Holy Spirit, trying to get our attention. They see it as an opportunity to go deeper in our relationships to discover something new about somebody that we thought we knew everything about. And avoiding conflict, by the way, doesn't just mean we avoid growth. It also means risking little resentments to take hold and build up over time. Which of course only drive us further apart to the point that perhaps we can no longer be bothered to argue because we no longer care enough.

In marriages it's what takes two people who were once madly in love and turns them into roommates. In friendships it leads to driving us apart. In families and in congregation, it leads to factions. In political discourse, it leads to demonizing those who differ. And I suspect we all know this, right? Yet, it's still so tempting, isn't it, to keep the peace?

I'll never forget a clergy colleague of mine telling me about her very first vestry meeting. She was the brand new associate, fresh out of seminary, wet behind the ears, all that. And one of the wardens just before the meeting turns to her and said, "Honey, can you get me a cup of coffee?" Yeah. He said, honey, So I asked her, "What did you say?" Because she's a bit of a firecracker and I was really expecting her to kind of straighten him out, but she actually didn't really say anything. For all the reasons, for all the pressures and for all the double standards that many of you listening to this are probably all too aware.

But I was a little disappointed, I have to say, because like I said, she was a firecracker and I didn't expect that from her. But then a few months later, same kind of thing happened to me. I was at coffee hour after church, when a well-known longtime member came up and said, "Father Chris, I really want to commend you. I want to commend you on this social experiment that is your family." Yeah, that happened.

And his wife was right next to him and you could kind of see her holding her breath kind of worried about what I might say next. But I too found myself keeping the peace. I told myself he was of a different generation. Maybe he was just trying to do his best. Plus I knew that I was kind of mildly controversial as the first gay priest at that parish, so I didn't want to make any waves. You get the idea, right?

But what's the problem with all that? The problem is when we avoid conflict, we avoid confronting the big and the microaggressions, whether they're against us or against others. When we do that, we are keeping a false peace. It's the Roman peace. The one that is founded on the absence of conflict, but is devoid of justice and authentic relationship. And it nearly always comes at the expense of someone's full humanity. True peace, the peace of God, the peace that passes all understanding comes as Mother Theresa puts it, "When we remember that we belong to one another." It comes when we take the time and the risk to lean into our conflicts, to do that hard work that we might emerge on the other side, more understanding, more trusting, more bonded, more loving.

So rather than avoid or triangulate, what does today's gospel tell us? The first thing Jesus says to do is we should go to the person in person. And keep in mind here, we're not talking about abusive or violent people. Okay? That's an entirely different scenario. So assuming they're not dangerous, Jesus says the first thing to do is to go in person. Don't call them out over email. Don't do this over text. That never works out, right? God came to us in person. So we need to go in person.

That's the mystery of incarnation. Something magical happens when we show up. Our body language can reveal our openness. The inflection in our voice can show our hope. The compassion in our eyes can soften hard words. In fact in today's disconnected world, the very act of showing up, even if we have to be socially distanced, the very act of trying says more about how you value the person and your relationship than perhaps anything else.

The next thing Jesus says to do is to go in private. Don't embarrass them by bringing this up in front of others. Don't post it on their Facebook wall. Don't criticize them or slam them in the comments. When we do this kind of thing in public, psychologists will tell you it makes it all even harder because it entrenches us in our opinions because we've just made our allegations public, right? And so now there's no backing down. And it forces the other person to

have to now deny and defend themselves and probably even fire back. In the meanwhile, everybody watching gets to pick a side and egg us on and it just escalates from there.

Jesus says go one on one, because it's intimate. We are alone. And when we are alone with the other, we can let our guard down. We can be vulnerable. We can lead with our feelings rather than our accusations. We can begin with our woundedness rather than their shortcomings. Coming in private helps us to come in the spirit of Jesus to make our case, to claim our truth absolutely. But to also be open to hearing theirs as well, to be humble enough to listen and even be changed by it, perhaps. Coming in the spirit of Jesus means we do not come with the goal to win the argument, but we come with a posture of surrender laying down our arms in the hope of coming away with greater understanding and renewed trust.

As a former litigator, I confess I don't do this well. I try to win every argument I'm in. As if I'm arguing to a jury, Joe calls it my lawyer mode. Trying to win on debate points when the other person just needs to be heard. Trust me, it never works out. Which brings us to the last element. If going in person doesn't work, if you're just vetting heads, if you can't get past the finger pointing, or if you just keep coming back to the same issue over and over, it's okay to ask for help.

These conversations are hard and it's easy for them to spiral out of control, or just as often easy for us to settle on temporary superficial solutions that perhaps treat the symptoms of the moment, but avoid the deeper issues that we need to work on in our relationships. As Christians, we are in community for a reason, we aren't expected to be able to do this all on our own. It's not a failure to ask for help. It's part of the plan. It's part of the plan that from time to time, we need some help from a cooler mind and fresher perspectives.

Finally, what are we to make of this business toward the end of the gospel? That after having done all of that, let's say we've done it all and we still can't get anywhere. Do we write them off? Do we vote them off the island? Is that what Jesus means when he says treat them like tax collectors and Gentiles? No. Remember tax collectors and Gentiles were the very people Jesus never gave up on. Today's gospel comes right after the parable of the lost sheep and the good shepherd never stops looking for them.

I think that's the key to understanding this. It's not about writing them off. It's about never giving up. It's about continuing to minister them, to keep inviting them to the party. Keep offering to break bread with them. Keep healing them. Keep drinking water from their well. In short, never give up on them because God never gives up on us.

I saw this firsthand with that parishioner I mentioned, the one who referred to us as a social experiment. After that incident, we did our best to stay in relationship.

His wife did spiritual autobiography with Joe. He and I were in a Bible study together. And over time with God's help, stories were shared, feelings were mended, trust was built. And when our girls were born, they helped organize one of the most beautiful baby showers any parents could ever hope for.

So keep the doors open, go looking for the lost sheep because what we bind here and what we lose here matters. The decision to stay open to others in this short life, says something about a desire to stay open to God in our eternal one. You can't separate the two, how you treat the least is how you treat me. When we avoid and close ourselves off, because we think they have fallen just way too short, we close ourselves off to God. But when two or three come together, when two or three stay open to the possibility of healing and reconciliation, God will be there. He will be there every time to bring us all home.

Amen.

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