

I

Will Willimon is the Dean of the Chapel at Duke University and a pastor in the United Methodist Church. In his memoirs, he recalls the very first church he was assigned to serve in rural Georgia when he was still a student at Emory University.

The day before his first Sunday, Rev. Willimon drove out to the little one room country church to meet with his contact at the church and to get the lay of the land. Rev. Willimon arrived a little early and hoped to be able go inside and have a look around, but discovered that the doors to the church had been chained and secured with a padlock, so he waited outside.

When the church member arrived, Rev. Willimon said, "I'm glad you are here to open the lock on the door."

And the man replied, "Oh, that ain't our lock. The sheriff put that there. Things got rough here at the meeting last month. Folks started yelling at one another, carting off furniture they had given to the church. So, I called the sheriff and he came out here and put that lock on the door until the new preacher could get here and settle 'em down."

The name of the little country church, and Rev. Willimon promises

¹ I first heard this story in person when Rev. Willimon preached the baccalaureate services at Columbia Theological Seminary in May 2008. He referenced it again in a sermon he preached for Day 1 in 2017 -

that this part is true, was the Friendship Methodist Church.¹

II

Most of us, if we've hung around churches for any length of time, have a story or two we can tell about conflict in the church. Hopefully not one that ended up with a call to the sheriff's office, but I don't have to stand up here and tell you that while Scripture calls the church the body of Christ, that body is altogether human, and thus vulnerable to sin and the pain that it brings with it.

And when conflict comes in the life of the church, I think sometimes we wonder – does conflict mean that we're doing something wrong? Does conflict mean that we're falling short of what God intends for us? Does conflict mean that we've lost our way? And these very kinds of questions are before us in our reading this morning from Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth.

III

Once again, at the center of our story today is a man named Paul. Paul's story is a long and complex one, but suffice it to say that even though Paul wasn't one of Jesus' original 12 disciples, nevertheless, through the work of the Holy Spirit, Paul became the most important writer, theologian, pastor, and church planter in the first century.

https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf200416b/will_wilimon_one_in_christ

Last week, we read the story of Paul and Silas and their trip to Thessalonica, a port city and state capital in what is now modern-day Greece. After leaving Thessalonica, Paul and Silas continued their journey across the Peloponnesian Peninsula (that's really fun to say in a Presbyterian pulpit) and they came to Corinth, another cosmopolitan port city filled with people from all kinds of different cultural and religious backgrounds.

Paul stayed in Corinth for some time, but eventually, his travels led him elsewhere as he traveled throughout the Mediterranean basin, preaching the gospel and planting churches. And from time to time, Paul would receive and send correspondence to the believers in the cities that he had visited.

I don't imagine that Paul had any idea that 2,000 or so years later you and I would still be reading some of his letters. Reading through old letters is a little bit like listening to one end of a phone conversation. We can track the conversation, but there may be a few things that don't make sense to us, and we'll definitely need to bring in a little outside research and make a few inferences if we're going to get a good picture of what is going on. But thanks be to God, our ancestors in the faith have preserved a some of our family's old letters. In fact, of the 27 books of the New Testament, nearly half are letters that were written by or attributed to Paul.

So before us today is a section of the Book of First Corinthians, or more formally, Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. The people to whom Paul writes are living in and around the city of Corinth about 20 years or so after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Corinth was and still is a major seaport in Greece, situated on a spit of land with access to the sea on both sides. Consequently, it was a commercial center and a very cosmopolitan city, full of people of different backgrounds and viewpoints and opinions, which meant that the fledgling church was a breeding ground for conflict.

So listen now for a Word from God from 1 Corinthians, beginning at the first verse.

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

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

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— so that you are not lacking in any spiritual

gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul', or 'I belong to Apollos', or 'I belong to Cephas', or 'I belong to Christ.' Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

This is the Word of God for the people of God.

Can you just imagine the side eye that Chloe must have received from the Corinthians as they read Paul's letter?

Chole, or rather, Chloe's people reported to Paul that there were quarrels within the Corinthian church. And now that Chole's people ratted out the Corinthians to Pastor Paul, there were probably quarrels with Chloe, too.

And I just want to pause here for a minute and remind us all that this letter before us was probably written in the year 54 CE, that is, within 20 years or so of Jesus crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. Some of the recipients of this letter were age contemporaries of Jesus himself. And so I want us to release the notion that once the church was perfect, and then humans came along and messed it up.

Conflict is nothing new. In fact, conflict is as old as the human species itself. According to one account of creation in the Book of Genesis, God made the earth and the stars and all the plants and animals, and then God made the first human. And God placed the human in the garden, and then surveyed everything that God had made. And for the first time in the biblical story, God declares a part of creation that is not good. God said, "It is not good that the man should live alone." And so God created another human and placed them to live in the garden together. And when the first two humans began to live together, there was potential for conflict.

That may sound funny, but it's not a joke. For the root meaning of the

word conflict is “to strike together.” Conflict is not, in and of itself, a bad thing. In fact, it is an unavoidable fact of any human endeavor. Conflict is the way that, in a group of humans, the best ideas rise to the top, whether that group is a business, a school, a family, or a congregation. Conflict is necessary for anything to ever get done.

Paul wasn't upset with the Corinthian church for having conflict per se. He was upset that the conflict had become about people and personalities, rather than ideas.

And he named it for them. He said, what I mean is each of you says, “I belong to Paul,” and others “I belong to Apollos” and others “I belong to Cephas” and others “I belong to Christ.”

Paul wasn't concerned about the mere presence of conflict. By this point in his journey as a Christian, Paul had already been in the center of plenty of conflict. Paul knew from first-hand experience that the gospel brought together people from different backgrounds and points of view and experiences and knit them together in community centered around the risen Christ.

What concerned Paul about the Corinthians was that the conflict had devolved into personal attacks and one-upmanship, so much so that they were in danger of damaging or outright destroying their witness to the Corinthian community about the power of the cross and the good news about Jesus Christ.

IV

So I have a prediction for you, my friend. Sometime this week, sometime before another Sunday rolls around, you are going to discover that you're in conflict with someone else, most likely somebody close to you, like a family member or coworker or friend.

So the question for you is, how will you respond when conflict comes? Because how you respond to conflict when you encounter it, whether you find conflict in the church or in your home or in your school or in the workplace, either bears witness to the good news about Jesus in your life or it does not.

So how will you respond to it, not if it comes, but when it comes?

If you'll permit me, allow me to offer a few things to keep in mind when you find yourself in conflict.

First, remember that from the very beginning of the biblical story, God makes clear that every single human being was made in the image of God. There's not a single face you will look into this week that does not bear God's imprint upon it. I don't often think or talk in terms of the devil or the evil one or the enemy, but I know this – one way that the devil likes to escalate conflict is to tempt us to dehumanize the other – to view them as a problem to be solved or an enemy to be destroyed. And when we start dehumanizing each other, well, human history is full of dark, sad, and painful chapters about the results. So remember, that person who is driving

you the most crazy, the one who makes your blood boil, is nevertheless made in the image of and beloved by God, just as you are.

Second, assume that everyone you meet has their own troubles and struggles and is doing the best they can. There's a tendency, when we are in conflict, to declare our "side" the righteous one, and the other side the "unrighteous." In another letter to another church, Paul reminded the early Christians that there is not one human being who is totally righteous, not one. When you find yourself in conflict, be mindful that you, too, are a sinner in need of redeeming, and totally dependent upon God's grace and mercy. Be willing to own your own part, and if you have an amends to make, go and make it.

And finally, beware of the deadly danger of making conflict about personalities rather than ideas. You and I live in a culture that loves to watch personal attacks. When conflict starts, and someone yells out "fight," that middle school impulse to run and look and whip out our phones and film it – that immature response to conflict is hard to overcome, even as adults. It's that same immaturity that drives ratings and news cycles, particularly in an election year.

But my friend, remember that personal attacks are poison to community, and when they show up in the church, it's damaging to our collective witness.

Jesus himself tells us that the best way to deal with conflict is to strike together, head on. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus tells his followers, when you find yourself in conflict with someone, go right to the source and work it out one on one, preferably face to face. It may seem scary, but that's usually the best and fastest and healthiest way to work through conflict. Not for nothing, it seems to me that when Jesus needed to have a really important conversation with those whom he loved, they happened while on a walk or around a table, and sometimes even over a glass of wine.

V

So here we are. God has brought us together, people from different backgrounds with different points of view and different opinions, and God has knit us together into this thing called the church.

This particular congregation is now in its third century of mission and ministry in Christ's name in this place. And it has all been smooth sailing from day one, and there has never been a single moment of conflict in 204 years, right? If you haven't done so already, pick up a copy of the wonderful book that was published on the occasion of our bicentennial and read the story of The Organ War of 1857.

In just our lifespans alone, conflicts have come, and by the grace of God, some have gone. The civil rights movement, Vietnam, the role of women in the church, and sexual ethics are just

a few of the big issues that this congregation has wrestled with over the decades.

And not to air dirty laundry from the pulpit, but it's not a secret that there is some conflict present in this congregation even now, at this very moment. And I pray that all of us will remember that conflict in and of itself is not a sign that we have failed, or that the Spirit has abandoned us, or that we've let down our ancestors in faith. Conflict is normal, and in fact, inevitable in all human relationships, including the church. It's a natural and important part of doing life together.

As those who claim the name of Jesus Christ, how we frame conflicts and how we work through them either lifts up the gospel or brings shame upon it.

So, friends, will conflict tear us apart? Will Christ be divided among us? Will we split into camps and factions? Will we devolve into personal attacks?

Or will we remember why we're here in the first place – in response to God's grace, to create a community where people seek the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, rejoice in worship and go forth sharing the love of Christ with Athens and the world. For that is our mission, that is our reason for being together in this this called the church - to proclaim the cross of Christ in all its power.

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are

perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Thanks be to God. Amen.