

I

As most of you know, I grew up as the only child in our house. Now as the father of three young boys, I can see that there were certain advantages to being an only child.

I always had the entire back seat of the car to myself. I never had to draw an imaginary line down the center line of the vehicle and threaten bodily harm to anyone who dared to cross it.

On Saturday mornings, I always got to choose which cartoons to watch on television. There were no high-level negotiations to be had with another child over which program we watched.

Unless we had company, the bathroom next to my bedroom was always available to me whenever I might want or need it.

Sure, there were some downsides to not having another child in the house. But there wasn't a lot of daily conflict in my life over those kinds of things.

II

But all of us know that wherever two or more people are gathered, eventually, there will be some conflict. To be in any kind of human relationship means that eventually, there will be a difference of opinion. There will be differing ideas about the best way to move forward about something.

Sometimes in life, the stakes are low and so those conflicts are small. But other times, the stakes are very, very high, and the conflicts are intense.

And in our story for this morning, the early church is facing some very intense conflict.

III

This spring and summer, we've been reading and preaching our way through the Acts of the Apostles. We've been watching Jesus' ascension promise come to fruition – namely that the Holy Spirit would come upon his disciples, and they would be his witnesses beginning in Jerusalem, and then spreading to Judea, Samaria, and out to the ends of the earth.

Sometimes it's easy to forget just how small the church was at the very beginning. On the day of Pentecost, the sum total of Christians in the world only numbered 120 people. And it's easy to forget that all of the earliest believers in the church began not as Christians, but as faithful first-century Jews.

Jesus was born and raised in a Jewish household, as were Peter, Paul, Philip, Martha, Mary Magdalene, and every other one of the first disciples. They each grew up observing the laws in the Hebrew Scriptures about what was considered clean and unclean, the regulations about Sabbath keeping, and of course, for the men, when they were babies just eight days old, they each received the sign of the covenant encoded in the Hebrew Scriptures – the mark of circumcision.

But as the Holy Spirit continued to blow through the early church, the good news about the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus was beginning to

attract Gentiles, that is, people who were not born and raised as first century Jews. We read one story just last week, about a Roman army officer by the name of Cornelius who invited Peter to come to his home in Caesarea Maritima and share the good news of the gospel.

And in last week's story, you might have missed a little detail. While Peter was speaking in Cornelius' home, the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word, and the circumcised believers who had come with Peter, that is, Peter's Jewish companions, were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. Peter said, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?"

And then and there, those Gentiles were baptized in the name of a first-century Jew named Jesus of Nazareth.

And this sort of thing began to happen more and more. As the good news about the gospel began to spread beyond Jerusalem and Judea, more and more Gentiles, that is, people who were not born and raised as faithful, practicing, observant Jews, were nevertheless coming to faith in Jesus and claiming him as their Lord.

And so conflict began to develop in the early church. Some in the church thought that everyone who would claim Jesus as Lord should go through all of the required steps to become Jewish, which, according to the Hebrew

Scriptures, meant that the men should be circumcised.

And from the perspective of the Gentile men who were coming to faith in Jesus, you can see their side of the conflict. This wasn't something trivial. And eventually, this conflict became so acute that the leadership of the early church was forced to take up the matter. They called all the senior leadership of the church back to Jerusalem for a meeting.

And that brings us to our text for today. So now I invite you to listen for a Word from God from Acts 15:6-29.

*The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."*

*The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as*

*they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they finished speaking, James replied, “My brothers, listen to me. Simeon has related how God first looked favorably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,*

*‘After this I will return,  
and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen;  
from its ruins I will rebuild it,  
and I will set it up,  
so that all other peoples may seek the Lord—  
even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called.*

*Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things known from long ago.’*

*Therefore I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. For in every city, for generations past, Moses has had those who proclaim him, for he has been read aloud every sabbath in the synagogues.”*

*Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to*

*Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers, with the following letter: “The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the believers of Gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds, we have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Many years ago, I was leading a workshop for women and men who had been elected as new leaders in the congregation. And I asked each of them to take a scrap of paper, and on that piece of paper, write down one word that described their biggest fear about taking on a leadership role in the church.

When I reviewed the slips of paper, one word kept coming up over

and over again - Conflict. Their biggest fear about taking on a leadership role was that there was the potential for conflict in the church.

And on some level, I sympathize with their fear. There is plenty of acrimony and dissension and division in our world, especially these days. We all hope that the church can be the one place where we can have some sanctuary from all that bitterness and enmity.

But over the years, I've come to understand that what those leaders feared wasn't conflict, but rather loss.

Conflict is a necessary ingredient in any human endeavor, and we have little conflicts in our relationships all the time. The word conflict comes from a Latin word that simply means to strike together. When there are two or more ideas about how to proceed, conflict is simply the means by which the best ideas rise to the top. The best businesses and teams and organizations have learned not to run from or avoid conflict - instead they mine for it - they seek it out - because through conflict, we make new discoveries and improve old processes and move forward together.

What those newly elected leaders feared wasn't conflict itself. What they feared was the possibility that conflict could lead to loss. Loss of members, loss of dollars, but most especially, loss of relationships.

So here in our story from Acts, the leadership of the church is facing serious conflict. Feelings were strong.

The dividing lines were clear, and there was no small amount of debate.

But our forebears in faith modeled something vital for us. Conflict is inevitable. Conflict has been present in the church from the very earliest days. But how the church handled the conflict bore testimony to the presence of the Spirit among them.

The whole assembly kept silence and listened intently to each speaker. There was no crosstalk. There were no sidebar conversations going on while someone else had the floor.

Feelings were strong, to be sure. But there were no ad hominem attacks, no personal insults. They debated the ideas, not people.

Even though feelings were strong, there was never even a suggestion of violence. Many of the participants in this meeting had been with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, and Peter still remembered Jesus' stinging rebuke when he pulled out a sword that night - those who live by the sword will die by the sword, said Jesus.

And so after listening to one another, the decision they ultimately reached was truly remarkable. They decided that the former requirements for entry were no longer needed. They decided that the boundaries around the new community were going to be far wider than any of them previously imagined possible.

But what's more, they modeled for the world what healthy conflict looks

like. They modeled for the world how Christians can strike together and bring the best ideas to the top.

#### IV

So I'm going to make a prediction for you, my friend. Sometime in the next seven days, you're going to find yourself in some conflict. There will be competing ideas about the best way to proceed about something.

So the question is, when that conflict comes, how will you handle it? Will your words and actions show forth your baptism in Christ? Will they demonstrate the fruits of the Spirit – patience and gentleness and self-control?

Or, when conflict comes, will your words and actions sow the bitter fruit of enmity, spite, and just plain meanness?

Conflict is an inevitable part of every one of your relationships, my friend. Combat, however, is optional.

#### V

And what about us, in our life together here at First Presbyterian Church?

These are difficult days for all of us. There is so much acrimony and bitterness and outright nastiness all around us. All of us want the church to be a place of sanctuary, of beauty, of peace, especially in such uncertain times. All of us, I think, also want the church to make an impact on our community, to be an embassy of the kingdom of God, to be the kind of place

that is known not just for our building or that we've been around a long time, but to be the kind of place that is actively trying to make Athens and the world beyond better for everyone.

But here's the rub. The church is made up of people, and people have different opinions and ideas about how to go about doing those things. We even have different ideas about how to just name and describe some of the problems in our community and our nation.

A difference of ideas and opinions in the church of Jesus Christ is nothing new. It's nothing to be upset about or ashamed about or about which to be frightened.

In fact, it's an opportunity. It's an opportunity for us to be the church, to be a model for the world of how to work through conflict without resorting to combat. To be a model for the world of how people who hold differing opinions and viewpoints can study Scripture together, can reflect together on their common theological heritage, can listen intently to one another, can pray together and discern together the will of the Spirit for Christ's church.

It's an opportunity for us, as messy and imperfect as we are, to be the body of Christ, redeemed by his blood, and sent into the world as a visible sign of God's extraordinary grace.

May it be so. Amen.