

"LIVING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
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New York, New York 10028  
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### INTRODUCTION

Our Jewish friends are wonderful story tellers and you may have noticed that they don't mind making fun of themselves. Here are a couple of examples and I've got others...

During a service at an old synagogue in Eastern Europe, when the Shema prayer was said, half the congregation stood up and the other half remained seated. And those who were seated started yelling at those who were standing to sit down and those who were standing yelled at those who were sitting to stand up. And the poor Rabbi, educated as he was in the Law and the commentaries, didn't know what to do.

His congregation urged him to consult a housebound 98 year old man who was one of the original founders of the Temple. The Rabbi went to see him, hoping that this elderly gentleman could tell him what the actual tradition in their temple was - to sit or to stand for this important prayer. He made his way to the nursing home with a representative of each faction of the congregation.

The one whose followers stood during the Shema said to the old man, "Is the tradition to stand during that prayer?" The old man answered, "NO...that is not the tradition". Whereupon the one whose followers sat then asked, "Is the tradition then to sit during Shema?" The old man said, "No, that is not the tradition". "But", said the Rabbi to the old man,

"The congregants fight all the time, yelling at each other about whether...." The old man interrupted, exclaiming, "THAT is the tradition...."

### DEVELOPMENT

And here's the other bit of humor our Jewish friends tell on themselves which, I'm sure, you'll enjoy...

The Jewish School, Yeshiva University, decided the time had come to field a crew team. But, unfortunately, they lost race after race. They practiced long and hard each day, but never managed to come in any better than dead last.

The head of the University finally decided to send Yankel to spy on the Harvard team. So Yankel shlepped off to Cambridge and hit in the bullrushes of the Charles River, from where he carefully watched the Harvard team as they practiced rowing on the Charles. Finally Yankel returned to Yeshiva and said,

"I have figured out their secret. They have eight guys rowing and only one guy shouting".

Perhaps, when we are having a difficult time getting along with one another at work or home or church, we can just "layit" to our Jewish roots.

### THE CHURCH AT CORINTH

Certainly that little Church at Corinth had developed a tradition of fighting among themselves. It sounds like they had one guy rowing and the rest all shouting. Paul writes,

"Now, I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord, Jesus, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you...but that you be

united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloë's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you say, '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?"

Paul was writing to a church that was in conflict. Conflict is a very real part of life, isn't it? We have conflicts in our homes. We have conflict in the workplace. And, unfortunately, we can have conflict in the church.

Bill Cosby has a wonderful routine that has been circulating, so I'm told, on the Internet. This is the way it goes. He says,

"Whenever your kids are out of control, you can take comfort from the thought that even God's omnipotence did not extend to His kids. After creating heaven and earth, God created Adam and Eve. And the first thing He said to them was 'DON'T'....'DON'T'"

"Don't what?" asked Adam. "Don't eat the forbidden fruit" said God. "Forbidden fruit? Really? Where is it?" asked Adam. "It's over there" said God, wondering why He hadn't stopped after making the elephants. A few minutes later God saw the kids having an apple break and He was angry! "Didn't I tell you not to eat that fruit?" the first parent asked. "Uh huh" replied Adam. "Then WHY did you?" "I don't know" answered Adam.

Says Bill Cosby,

"God's punishment was that Adam and Eve should have some kids of their own. Thus the pattern was set and it has never changed."

But there is a note of reassurance in all of this. If you have persistently and lovingly tried to give them wisdom and they haven't taken it, don't be hard on yourself. If God had trouble handling children, what makes you think it would be a "piece of cake" for you? So remember that conflict is a part of life - in the home, with our kids, with our spouses...in the workplace, in the church, too.

Early one morning, an Englishman was blasting away at a clump of brush on a grouse hunt. Suddenly an outraged gentleman appeared and said, "See here, old man....you almost shot my wife with that volley". And with that, the hunter properly shamed, replied, "So, sorry old chap...here, have a 'go' at mine...over there".

How do we best deal with conflict in the home, or in the workplace, or in the church...or wherever we may find it? Let me offer three thoughts or three ways that experts suggest we use or carry along with us as we confront this age-old and universal problem.

SEE WHAT THE OTHER PERSON SEES

First of all, in any conflict do try to see what the other person sees.

I think that all of us have our own perception of reality. When we are in conflict with another person, it may not be that they are trying to be difficult or hard to get along with.....they may actually see reality in a different way than we do.

Leo Buscaglia tells of being on a plane for a five hour flight from LA to NYC. When he took his aisle seat, it was obvious that the man next to him was irritated by his presence. He explained to Buscaglia that he had hoped to have room to spread out. Within moments, they heard a baby cry...."Great!" said the man under his breath.

"I hate babies on airplanes....we'll have to listen to that child for five hours...all the way across the country!"

When the stewardess stood to make her remarks about safety precautions, the traveler turned to Buscaglia and remarked,

"I hate stewardesses....they're nothing but glorified waitresses hoping to meet rich men on the flight".

Then when she announced that lunch would be served mid-flight, the man turned to Buscaglia and whispered to him,

"I hate airplane food...tastes to me like it's made from rubber....and it's always cold...."

When she later on announced that there was an area at the rear of the plane reserved for smokers, he said, "I hate smokers...they all should be shot". Buscaglia replied,

"All of them? I know some people...some nice people who are smokers"...but the man replied with even greater resolve, "I hate smokers....all of them...dirty habit!"

When at long last the plane was well on its way to this city, the man turned to Buscaglia and asked,

"What do you do?" Leo Buscaglia replied, "I'm a professor". "Really...oh, and what do you teach?" "Educational psychology" Leo replied. "And what's that exactly?" continued the fellow next to him. To which Buscaglia replied, "Mostly I teach courses in relationships...how to treat one another...how to get along....basically, I teach about love".

The "ornery" traveler then responded in absolute sincerity...."Well, I'm glad to meet someone who shares my values".

It's not easy, but the first step in resolving any conflict is to try to see the reality that the other person sees. Stephen Covey states this simple principle in another way. He says:

"FIRST, seek to understand, then seek to be understood"

PUT YOURSELF IN THE OTHER PERSON'S PLACE

person's place. Step one is to listen to the other person. The second step is to identify with the other person. Again, so often in the heat of battle or conflict, our initial response is to strike back. And this never solves anything. It only escalates the battle. So, learn to control your words.

Then, in the second place, try to put yourself in the other

And please notice the touch of humility that Paul shows us in this passage. Factions in the Corinthian Church were forming around the various strong personalities in that little New Testament Church. Some were saying, "I belong to Paul". Others were saying, "I belong to Apolles...." another fine teacher. Others were saying, "I belong to Cephas". And some were saying, "I belong to Christ"...as if Christ were just another historical figure in the early church. But notice that Paul takes to task, first, his own little fan club. "Has Christ been divided?" he asks. "Was Paul crucified for you?" Or, were you baptized in the name of Paul?"

In a sense Paul is identifying with members of the other factions to scold those who were united behind him in order that healing may take place for the whole community.

It's not easy to identify with that person whose view of reality is in conflict with your own. We know that. At such times, we need to step back and clear our heads and our hearts and identify with that other person...with whom we are in conflict. Perhaps we are not seeing what they are seeing.... or feeling what they are feeling. This is so important for us to do.

FIND A COMMON BRIDGE

And the final step, of course, in conflict resolution is to find that "common" bridge. The only way to solve any tear, any rupture in a relationship with another person is to match your reality to their reality until you find that area of common ground. Unless your goal is to simply destroy your adversary and walk away and leave the pieces on the ground, you are going to have to find that area of agreement.

Back in 1994, a Korean air jetliner crashed in the southern resort of Cheju while landing during a storm when the pilot and his co-pilot began to argue with each other as to whether the runway was long enough...then they fought each other for control of the aircraft as it touched down, causing it to skid off the runway and ram a safety barricade. All 152 passengers survived and eight crew members too, by jumping down an escape chute seconds before the Airbus A300 exploded in flames, but pilot Barry Woods and co-pilot Chung Chanku continued their argument, blaming each other for the crash and the plane exploded with them failing to escape,

Yes, unresolved conflict can bring down not only planes but also companies and families and all sorts of important relationships. Somebody has got to be big enough and Christian enough to take the first step and say the word that will help other words then get spoken. Perhaps St. Paul, as he tried to intervene in that Corinthian conflict, thought of something Jesus had said...

"So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something

against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go first...be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

And who was it who said,

"If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his (or her) tongue, he (or she) deceives himself and his religion is worthless"

(James 1: 26)

Yes...a loose tongue can cause hurt, anger and conflict...so be careful. Someone has to take the first step to build a bridge so that other more gentle words can travel across that bridge. A simply "I'm sorry" can work wonders. If George Steinbrenner can do it, so, too, can we! It takes a pretty big person.

#### CLOSING THOUGHTS

A few closing thoughts and observations. To me, it's interesting to note that Paul did not point out or criticize any beliefs those different factions held, or any acts those different factions committed except those of his own followers. All he was criticizing was the spirit of disunity that tore at that little church and before he went into any review of the problems in that fellowship, he reminded them of their fellowship, of their calling and of their spiritual resources.

Paul, of course, was a fantastic bridge builder and so, too, was Christ. He, of course, was the Number One Bridge builder...building the ultimate bridge between ourselves and God. And I believe....Christ's dream for His followers is to build bridges out to others instead of tearing them down....whether they be in our own family, workplace, or somewhere in the world. So, remember these three points: first: try to see what the other person sees. Second: walk for a while in their shoes and "feel" what they may be feeling. Third: then go out and build a bridge across which love and understanding can travel. And match their reality to your own.

#### PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness, O God, in these moments of quietness....sensitive to Your peace. Wrestle with us, below the surface of our lives...where so often seeds of conflict take hold. Where there is hatred, let us sow love. Where there is injury, pardon. Where there is doubt, faith. Where there is despair, hope. Where there is sadness, joy.

Grant that we may not so much seek to be understood, as to understand. For it is in giving that we receive....and it is in pardoning, that we ourselves are pardoned. In the spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen.