

Peace with Others

For Jesus, the Communion table was what he chose to be the lasting symbol to remember him by. “Do this in remembrance of me,” he said. But for Jesus, the Communion table was not just about Jesus offering himself to each of us as individuals, but rather it was about redefining family. You see, in Jesus’ culture, breaking bread together was about much more than sharing a meal; it was about naming your family. Let’s pause for a minute and think of who was at that table during Jesus’ last supper. There were men who would soon deny him. There was Judas who would betray him. There was Simon the Zealot and Matthew the tax collector – Matthew the one who collected taxes for Rome and Simon who wanted to violently overthrow Rome. In another life, Simon wanted to kill people like Matthew, and yet there they were, both at Jesus’ table, both a part of Jesus’ family. My guess is they still didn’t understand each other very well. And yet, that didn’t matter. All that mattered is that they both knew that there was a place for both a zealot and a tax collector at Jesus’ table. There was a place for both of them in Jesus’ family.

Today, we continue our sermon series, Life Centered in Peace, and specifically today we are talking about peace with others. Last week, Rev. Wendy talked about how acts of devotion – practicing gratitude and praying constantly help us find inner peace. Today, we are talking about living in such a way that we seek to live at peace with others.

But I want you to know at the outset that what I’m going to be saying today is particular to those relationships that are healthy, or, at the very least not harmful. What may be really good advice about those kinds of relationships can be terrible advice for abusive relationships. This sermon is not about maintaining relationships that are hurtful, abusive, or demeaning towards you. Rather, this sermon is about the inevitable conflict that happens anytime people are in relationship with each other – whether it’s with family members, coworkers, within our church, or in the wider community.

Throughout Scripture, we learn that people are not meant to be alone. We are social creatures, meant to live in community, and yet, living in community is hard. Specifically, living in community is hard because being in a community means that I can no longer make decisions or live my life just based on what I want or what I need without taking into consideration what others want and what others need. And sometimes people want different things or see things in a different way, and it’s so easy for disagreements over those differences to turn into outright conflict.

So today, hopefully we can think through a few things that all of us can do to live in peace with each other. But first, let’s talk a little bit about what peace is. I think we often think of peace as the absence of conflict. And in doing so, we think of conflict as negative and peace as good, right? But I actually don’t think that’s very helpful. Conflict is neither positive nor negative. It just is. It’s impossible to be in authentic relationship with people without having times of conflict. If we are in relationship, then there will be conflict – that’s just how it is.

So conflict, itself, is neither good nor bad, but how we deal with it is. In our scripture today, Jesus gives the disciples instructions on dealing with conflict. This is one of the very few instances where Jesus actually gives us very concrete, very specific instructions. First, Jesus asks us to go to the person directly. We don't talk about them in veiled references on social media. We don't talk about them to other people. We first go to them.

So the next part of Jesus' instruction on conflict resolution gets a little tricky – "if they won't listen to you, bring one or two elders with you." I think if we're not careful, this idea could lead to something family systems therapists call Triangulation which basically means instead of dealing with someone I'm in conflict directly, I go around them to another person – the opposite of what Jesus first asked his hearers to do.

But another way to understand Jesus' instruction is that sometimes, other people, especially appropriate people for the situation, can be helpful in resolving conflict. For example, if you are having conflict in a marriage or romantic relationship, a couple's or family counselor could be very helpful. If you are having problems at work, the HR department could maybe help find a solution. When we bring people into our conflicts, we should always do so not so that they will take our side, but because they might be able to help us come to a solution, this is especially true when the people we can bring in are folks who are specifically trained to help people work through their conflict.

Then finally, Jesus ends this instruction by saying, if nothing else works, bring it to the church. What in the world is he talking about here? I'm guessing y'all probably don't want me adding a part of the service where you can tell the whole church what someone else has done to you? I think this may be a place where it's best not to take Jesus too literally. But maybe, rather than expecting the church to arbitrate on your behalf, we can all look to the church to be a place that supports us in the midst of stressful relationships. Let me give you an example.

Being a dad is the best thing I've ever done. I love it. But it is exhausting, especially these last few years.

When the pandemic first hit, there was a day when I was just done...Mary Page and I had been trying to work, trying to home school Nina, trying to pay attention to Julian who had just turned 2. And finally, we had made it to the best part of the day for an exhausted parent – you know what that is right – bedtime for the kids. But guess what, the kids didn't want to go to bed. So after ...lovingly encouraging them, after sternly telling them, after begging with them, and nothing was working, I completely lost my cool and yelled.

They both started crying. I immediately felt bad. It was awful – not my best moment.

The next day, I told this story to some of my clergy colleagues who are also my closest friends. None of them said, "Geez, your kids are such brats." None of them were like, "I'm on your side. They're clearly wrong." But also, none of them said, "Wow, you were really a terrible parent in that situation." Instead they said things like, "Yeah, parenting is hard." The ones with kids said,

"I've been there." You see, what I needed was not for them to take my side. I needed them to simply listen to me and to acknowledge that parenting in a pandemic is hard. It helped a lot.

I think that's the role of church in seeking peace in our relationships. Church is the place where people who love us can say, "Yeah, parenting is hard. Yeah marriage is hard. Yeah, relationships are hard." It's the place that says, "Be kind to yourself and forgive yourself for snapping at your kid when you were tired."

You see friends, striving to live in peace with others is not something we have to try to do all by ourselves. Part of being in a church community is that, yes, there will be times when we are in conflict with each other. But I believe there will be far more times when we find that we have a community of people who are there to give us just the support we need, and with that support, it's a little easier to live in such a way that cultivates peace in all our relationships. Amen.