

The Ministry of Reconciliation
How to Handle Conflict in a Christian Way – I
July 10, 2016

¹¹ Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. ¹² We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to boast about us, so that you may be able to answer those who boast about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart. ¹³ For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. ¹⁴ For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; ¹⁵ and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

¹⁶ From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. 2 Corinthians 5:11-21 (ESV)

This morning we are beginning a new series entitled, How to handle conflict in a Christian way. So, how many of you here this morning like conflict, you look forward to it, you get excited about it, it is one of your favorite things to do? Is there anyone here this morning who really enjoys conflict? Yet, conflict is an inevitable part of life. If there is any group of people that should be better at handling conflict than all the others, you would think it should be Christians. Yet, the truth is not only do we seem no better than others at handling conflict, we often seem worse. Throughout the centuries Christians have been responsible for and a part of just as many wars as non-Christians.

In the middle of the time frame representing the history of Christianity, lies *The Crusades* which was a series of wars between the 11th and 15 centuries, most authorized and approved by the Catholic Church throughout Europe and the Middle East where it is estimated 1.7 million people were killed, mostly Muslims. Just to put that number in perspective: It is estimated that at that time there were 300 million people living in the world. So if you were to take that same percentage and apply to the number of people living in the world today, Muslim terrorists would have to kill 35- 40 million people to reach the same percentage.

Yet, this morning as we start this new series on “How to Handle Conflict in a Christian Way” we don’t want to focus on wars and the number of people killed by Christians throughout the centuries, we want to focus on the conflict in our own lives – personal conflict, family conflict, conflict within the church, conflict in our workplaces, our own communities – because if we can learn to handle conflict there – the other should take care of itself. While Mennonites and Anabaptists are not known for literally taking other peoples’ lives, we are known for cutting off,

shunning, ex-communicating and being some of the most “passive-aggressive” people on earth today.

Throughout this series we are going to be focusing on how Jesus and the early church handled conflict. Other than Scripture, one of the books we will be drawing a lot from is entitled Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Christians by John Paul Lederach. John Paul Lederach has devoted his life to conflict resolution, conflict transformation, and reconciliation. He has worked with governments in war torn countries like Nicaragua, Somalia, Northern Ireland, Columbia, Nepal and the Philippines. He is the founding director of The Center for Justice and Peacebuilding at Eastern Mennonite University and the director of the Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies at the University of Notre Dame. But his book Reconcile is not so much about his conflict transformation work in those war-torn countries, but as the subtitle points out, it is about conflict transformation for ordinary Christians. His main thesis of the book? “**What if reconciliation is central to the biblical message?**” Though Mr. Lederach comes from a Mennonite background, Christian leaders from many other Christian denominations are recognizing the importance of his work and the need for conflict transformation and reconciliation training for all Christians. Recently Bill Hybels’ Willowcreek Church outside of Chicago did a brief series entitled “Reconcile” based specifically on Lederach’s book.

So what exactly is conflict?

Merriam Webster’s Dictionary defines conflict in the following ways:

- a struggle for power, property, etc.
- strong disagreement between people, groups, etc., that results in an angry argument
- a difference that prevents agreement
- a fight, battle, war
- a competitive or opposing action of incompatibles

The Anabaptist/Mennonite tradition is that peacemaking (*Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God*, Matthew 5:9) is an essential element of the Christian life and that nonviolence and nonresistance are teachings that Jesus expected his disciples to follow. For the first 400 years or so it was expected that was how Anabaptist Christians, including Mennonites, were supposed to live among each other. It really wasn’t until the past 50-75 years that Mennonites have tried extending peacemaking, non-violence and non-resistance to other people groups, governments and nations. The interesting thing is that as we have tried to extend peacemaking, non-violence and non-resistance to others, we have not done such a good job among ourselves. The Mennonite church is rife with dissension, splits, schisms and unresolved conflict. It’s really not that different today than it has been throughout its 500 year history. We might not literally kill one another, but we do not hesitate to readily dismiss one another with words, looks and deeds.

I confess this morning that I am often just as guilty as others. I also confess this morning that I do not like conflict. Conflict causes me physical symptoms and often keeps me up at night. When I became a police officer 35 years ago, I expected conflict would be a part of my everyday life. When I became a pastor 15 years ago, I did not expect conflict would be a part of my

everyday life. Boy, was I naïve. I don't know what I was thinking. It's kind of like when two people get married and they think there is never going to be conflict or problems.

That biblical truth of Jesus' when he said "whenever two or three gather together in my name, I am with them," is trumped only by the truth "whenever two or more people get together, whether Christian or non-Christian, there will be conflict."

From both the biblical account and the historical accounts, it seems like for the first thirty years of his life Jesus was able to stay under the radar. He lived in the rather obscure town of Nazareth and probably was a simple carpenter following in the footsteps of his earthly father, Joseph. Then came his baptism at the river Jordan, the descending upon him of the Holy Spirit and that same Spirit sending him out into the desert to be tempted by Satan. If he was smart he would have stayed there! At least there he knew who his enemy was! ☺

In John's gospel it tells us that upon his return he went out and began calling his disciples and then his first official act of his ministry recorded in John's gospel is the miracle at the wedding feast in Cana – the turning of the water into wine.

But before he performs the miracle we have this very interesting interaction between Jesus and his mother:

On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus also was invited to the wedding with his disciples. When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come." John 2:1-4 (ESV)

Why was Jesus so upset with his mother? Because though his final hour had not yet come (that which would come with his death on the cross), the hour to begin his ministry, that which would lead to his final hour, had arrived and he knew what it meant. He who was able to stay under the radar up to this point was soon to face conflict in every area of his life – in his own family, from the Jewish religious leaders, from the Roman political leaders, and even from many of those who claimed to be his followers – conflict at every turn!

Jesus' response to conflict was as varied as all those who he experienced conflict with. He didn't just give in. Though there were times which he retreated or avoided specific situations, especially when he knew it would escalate the conflict too soon. At one time he even told his disciples that as they go out and preach the Good News, if there are some that want to reject the truth, don't argue with them, just shake the dust off your feet and leave, move on. At other times Jesus confronted conflict head-on. To some he showed mercy, especially to those who were able to humble themselves and acknowledge their own sinfulness, yet he challenged them to turn from their sin. To the Pharisees and scribes and other religious leaders who seemed to lack any amount of compassion, he confronted outright.

But Jesus never allowed the conflict that he was in, even that which was the most intense, to cause him to resort to violence in return. His overturning of the merchants' tables in the temple courtyard and making a whip of cords was the most violent Jesus we have recorded in the

Scriptures and even then there is no indication that it was ever directed at the people themselves. For those of us who call ourselves Christians we should be looking to Jesus to see how he handled conflict with other human beings.

For those who study and work with human conflict for a living, like John Paul Lederach, they use different words like “conflict resolution,” “conflict management,” or “conflict transformation.” When working and dealing with conflict all three are appropriate: At times we need to learn to manage conflict, at other times we need to resolve the conflict and at other times we need to allow the conflict to transform us. If conflict is an everyday part of our human existence, then instead of seeing conflict as a natural disruption to our everyday existence, we need to see conflict as a means God uses to continually transform us into the people he wants us to be.

Jean Paul Lederach says “Conflict transformation” is most accurate because it is based on two verifiable realities: conflict is normal in human relationships and conflict is a motor of change.”

The word that we find in the Bible for “Conflict Resolution,” “Conflict Management,” or “Conflict Transformation” is “Reconciliation.” Why is it important that we understand “reconciliation”? Because it is one of the few ministries that every Christian is called to.

Our passage this morning captures the primary ministry which every Christian is called to. Captured best in the second half of the passage:

¹⁶ From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. ¹⁸ All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹ that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21 (ESV)

Five times in those brief verses some form of the word "reconciliation" is used. Five times should tell us that “reconciliation” is the theme of the passage, it is all about the ministry of reconciliation. The text itself forms the heart and soul of our responsibility as Christians. God has called each of us to the ministry of reconciliation.

But there are two aspects to the word “reconciliation” in the Bible. One is, reconciled to God and the other is reconciled to one another. And in God’s view, we can’t have the one without the other. We will not be reconciled to one another the way God wants us to until we are reconciled with Him. Once we are reconciled to Him, then we will see the need to be reconciled to one another.

The first part of “the ministry of reconciliation,” is to bring the message of reconciliation to sinners, to share The Good News of Jesus Christ, that the hostility, the enmity, the alienation, the

separation between God and sinful man can be totally changed so that all sinners can become reconciled to God. Enemies can become friends forever, or as many teenagers today use the hash tag “BFF” – “Best Friends Forever!”

That is the gospel message. That is the Good News. It is possible for sinners to be reconciled to God. And it is our calling as Christians to share the Good News of that reconciliation. That reconciliation comes only through each person acknowledging their own sinfulness, confessing their sinfulness to God, repenting (agreeing to turn from that sinfulness) and putting their faith in Jesus Christ as the only source of salvation. That is the only way one can be made right, or be reconciled to God. That is the first and most important part of the ministry of reconciliation. If we miss that we have missed the boat.

When it comes to resolving conflict or the ministry of reconciliation, whether it be in families, communities, in nations or between nations throughout the world, here is the problem as I see it: we are trying to resolve the conflict when the people usually involved in the conflict do not have the right view of God and/or have never been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ.

I think back to my trip several years ago with a Christian Peacemakers Team to Israel and the West Bank. Only to discover that some on the team were not even Christian. And I observed some of them, along with others who did claim to be Christian, seeming to provoke as much violence at times as others were trying to prevent. It didn’t seem to be that much different from my days as a State Trooper when I sometimes observed other police officers provoking violence. That is not “the ministry of reconciliation.”

One cannot really work at the second part of the ministry of reconciliation, reconciliation with and between others, until that person has first been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. The key to the entire passage this morning, the message or ministry of reconciliation actually lies back in the first part of the passage, in verse 14, “For the love of Christ controls us.” Without that, our peacemaking and reconciliation efforts will always fall short. Reconciled to God through Jesus Christ is the first step of the Ministry of Reconciliation.

But, the Greek word, translated in our passage this morning as “reconciliation,” also means to reconcile among human beings or between human beings.

The English dictionary defines “Reconciliation” in the following ways:

- the act of causing two people or groups to become friendly again after an argument or disagreement (after a conflict).
- the process of finding a way to make two different ideas, facts, etc., exist or be true at the same time.
- the action of reconciling or the state of being reconciled.
- a sacrament of the Roman Catholic Church where one has been made right with God again.

All to say, as we begin our series this morning on how to handle conflict in a Christian way and reconciliation, the ministry of reconciliation is not an easy ministry. But it is something that we

are all called to do. So as we begin this series on the ministry of reconciliation and how to handle conflict in a Christian way, it's important that we acknowledge several things:

1. Conflict is a part of everyday life.

As long as there are sinful human beings here on earth, there will be conflict.

2. Long-lasting and effective conflict resolution and reconciliation between people will only take place when the people's relationship with God is being made right. That includes our own relationship with God.
3. For those of us who claim to have been made right with God through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, then we need to accept that we have been given the ministry of reconciliation – first inviting people to be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ and then working at reconciling ourselves to others and helping others be reconciled to one another.
4. Resolving conflict and the ministry of reconciliation is not easy. There are no simple solutions or answers and there is no one size fits all solution to handling conflict.
5. We need to acknowledge that for the most part, we have stunk at it. Too often we have been passive-aggressive, too often we have fled, avoided, looked the other way (whatever your preferred method of flight response is) and too often we have responded with the fight response - physical violence, cut-off, alienation, name-calling – you name it, none of the ways which are synonymous with Jesus' way of handling conflict.

After all the events in our nation this past week, it seems like there is no better time to start a series on Handling Conflict in a Christian Way –

Two black men shot and killed by police. Were they completely innocent? At this point we really don't know that. Were they shot and killed because they were black? We really don't know that.

But we did discover what happens when we crank up the rhetoric, the name calling, the generalization of a group of people based on the actions of a specific number of that group – whether it be blacks or police officers.

By now we should be coming to realize that more guns is not the answer. It's not just the stories that make the headlines. Those were not the only three police involved shootings this past week in our nation. Other suspects were shot and killed by police and at least one other police officer was shot and killed. How about the sixty-six men, women and children who were shot in Chicago over the 4th of July weekend?

Put yourselves in the shoes of Dallas Police Chief David Brown, who is black, and who's own son was killed in a shootout with police on Father's Day 2010, in which a police officer was shot and killed, and who is now grieving the loss of five of his own officers.

So instead of offering a closing prayer to my message today, I suggest we take a moment of silence to remember some of the lives that were lost this past week in the violence that continues to sweep the nation: