

“Our God Embraced Our Conflict for Us”

“I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!” (Luke 12:49-50).

Do you have a food or experience that creates a reaction within you simply when its mentioned? Perhaps for some of you if I just mention the smell of chocolate chip cookies, those words transport you to whole other memory and feeling. Or if I mention jalapeño peppers, or habanero or ghost peppers maybe you can already feel your mouth seize up and your head begin to sweat at the thought of their taste. What if I mentioned a certain city, Chicago, St. Louis, Bloomington, West Lafayette or even Fort Wayne does the mention of those names trigger something for you? How about the mention of an injury or another health challenge: a broken bone, a torn ACL, a heart attack, cancer, anxiety, depression? I don't know about you, but I find it truly astonishing how much reaction certain words can trigger within us.

Well, this weekend, there's another trigger word that we're dealing with and that is the word, conflict. For some of us this one word might be on the same level as that of a swear word or curse word. It is a cringe-worthy word that should never be uttered! For others this word is a challenge that is accepted and maybe even at times sought! There are times for many when the mere mention of conflict, creates angst and turmoil within before the actual conflict arrives. There are times for many when the mention of conflict is more like a battle cry, revving a person up to charge aimlessly into a situation to conquer a perceived enemy.

No matter what kind of reaction this word triggers within us, there's no denying that our days and weeks are littered with conflicts of varying intensity. This month and especially this past week and even the weeks to come are full of back to school moments for so many families. I don't think it's hard for us to remember or imagine the conflicts the first week of school can bring! For many, work can be dealing with one conflict right after another! Likewise, family relationships can be the source of endless conflict as well. There are so many places that we run into conflict and perhaps more truthfully, so many places that we just expect conflict to exist.

Regardless of how we feel about conflict, each of us has two major temptations we face on how we deal with conflict. One temptation is to stay silent concerning the conflict. Ignoring and avoiding conflict is so common and each of us likely has experience giving into this temptation. The other temptation compounds on the first, going beyond silence to speaking out to cover up or deceive or misdirect the truth about the conflict at hand. Again, all of us are likely very practiced fallers into this temptation as well. Since we are so practiced at dealing with conflict in these two ways, we find our selves in a very troubling state as we consider our readings this weekend.

Surprising or not, our Gospel reading makes it very clear that God is another source of conflict for us! Jesus' words don't shy away from this truth when He tells His disciples, **“Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division”** (Luke 12:51). Honestly, this is nothing new for God. In fact, the reading from Jeremiah highlights another example of this reality. As God acts through His faithful prophet Jeremiah, He is brought into conflict with the false prophets. According to the words of our Jeremiah reading, these false prophets were speaking out of turn when it came Israel's future. The false prophets proclaimed peace and security on the horizon, falsely attaching the Lord's name to a message He didn't give. It was their deception that was leading God's people away from the truth that God was proclaiming through Jeremiah. It was the false prophets' misdirection that was leading Israel into even greater conflict with God as they ignored the warning signs around them.

This example from Jeremiah and Jesus' own words from Luke 12 reveal to us the same reality in our present time. Whenever God intervenes in this sinful world, conflict ensues. Just because the words we read this day are from events that happened years and years ago doesn't change the fact that the holy, righteous God of the Bible remains close at hand and in so doing stands in conflict with a world that continues to embrace sinners' ways. Hearing that these Bible words still apply in our time, likely triggers reactions within us. Knowing that God is a source of conflict for this sinful world and for us as sinners in this sinful world, likely leads us to first judging God as uncaring, unloving and not understanding. Then we easily give into the temptations to be silent about this conflict or even worse yet misrepresenting this conflict as unimportant.

However, if we were honest about ourselves, realizing our conflict with God is actually a statement first about who we are and the state that we're in. We're the ones who have created conflict with God by our actions and at times lack of action! We're the ones who manipulate God's Word to our liking either by following someone else who tells us what we want to hear or even just telling ourselves what we want to hear instead of listening to His Word. We want to ignore, avoid and cover up our conflict with God for the things we possess, by the worries and fears we take upon ourselves and out of His control and through the earthly relationships we prioritize over our relationship with Him. The honest truth, is that we have earned and deserved the conflict we have with God.

Yet Jesus, couldn't and wouldn't leave us to face this conflict we earned and deserved on our own. Yes, He came to throw fire upon the earth, but He also came to extinguish that fire by the baptism with which He had to be baptized. Jesus came to take His Father's fiery wrath upon Himself and appease this wrath by His bloody baptism upon the cross. For our sake, Jesus embraced conflict even when it put Him in the crosshairs of His Father's righteous anger. At the cross, in a way that we can't fully explain or understand, God the Father, holy and righteous, and God the Son, sin bearer and Savior, placed themselves into conflict with each other so that the people of God, the family of God might live. On the cross, Jesus embraced the greatest conflict of all for us so that we might have peace with God for all eternity.

And for all the distress embracing this conflict gave Jesus, the joy of uniting the family of faith with God forever far outweighed the pain and shame of the cross. For from Jesus' embracing of this conflict flows the best resolution to conflict that God could give, forgiveness. Jesus' death and resurrection resolves the sinners', resolves our, conflict with God by earning the forgiveness we so desperately need. This forgiveness that Jesus has earned is placed concretely into our lives by His Word and Sacraments so that when the devil, the world and even our own sinful nature still try to convince us that we need to do something about our conflict with God we can run to and hold, touch, taste, see and hear the forgiving resolution that Jesus has already won and given for us.

The encouraging impact of Jesus embracing conflict for us is that right now, despite all the conflict we must still endure in this life, we are surrounded by witnesses of Jesus' victorious resolution. Through Jesus, we are members of the family of faith and by the Holy Spirit's work we will remain members of this family. We stand with those who have gone before us in the faith. And by God's grace and forgiveness, like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, etc. we even stand with members from our own earthly families those who died in the faith already and even those yet to come. Praise be to our God, who has embraced conflict for us and has united us with His family for all eternity. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan