

Sustain: The “Others”
Deal With It!
November 20/21, 2010

We’re on the home stretch of this 12-week journey into emotional healing and wholeness. After today, only one more message remains in this series, and I have to tell you that I’m a little bit sad to see it come to an end, for two reasons.

1. I’m sad to see it end because it has been so good for me personally to be able to review some of the things that God has been trying to develop in me.
2. I’m a little sad because I think this series has been helpful for many of *you*. I can’t remember the last time a series has had this much impact on this many people. Apparently, there are some things that God is trying to develop in you all, too.

But, having said that, I think I’ve learned some things from this experience about me and about you as a congregation and about God that will affect how I do future series. So, I have a feeling that this whole “dynamic” will continue in spite of the fact that the topic will change in the near future.

Speaking of the near future ... let me give you a very brief overview of where we’re going after next weekend, in the month of December.

- On the first weekend of December, the kids and leaders from Adventureland will lead our services and kick off the Christmas season. This is a tradition and it’s awesome and I invite you to be here for that.
- On the second and third weekends, I’ll be speaking to you about two Christmas traditions that can help us better experience Christ at Christmas. (By the way, on that second weekend of December, I’ll also be making a very important announcement about the future of NHCC, so you don’t want to miss that one).
- Then we have a modified schedule that runs from Christmas Eve through New Year’s weekend which I won’t go into now, other than to say that if you’re on the City or on the mailing list you’ll get details. I also want to point out that on Christmas Eve we’ll be having three services, 4:00, 5:30 and 7:30pm and we expect about 1,000 people total to be here sometime that evening.

Ok, let’s get into our topic for today. As you know, we’ve been talking about some of the key components of an *emotionally sustainable life*.

... living in such a way that we have the capacity to handle the never-ending stresses and strains, demands and disappointments of life without constantly imploding or exploding ...

... without becoming the kind of person who is anxious or negative or demanding, self-condemning, defensive, discouraged, depressed, angry, bitter, profane, fake, disengaged or any other word you can think of to describe emotional implosion or explosion.

Now, in the drama a few minutes ago, we saw a very common “implosion scenario:” *a person gets upset about*

something and then keeps stuffing their anger down until they become negative, bitter, defensive and fake. For a little while, on the outside, they're able to look and act like they're OK but, on the inside, deep down below the surface, they are not OK. They're imploding emotionally ... and that's an unsustainable way to live over the long haul.

In fact, if you're looking for a surefire way to let toxic emotional sludge build up and eventually overwhelm you, that strategy works really well. Sweep things under the rug. Pretend you're ok with people when you're really not. Do whatever it takes to maintain peace at all costs.

Of course, I don't think any of us are *intentionally* trying to create sludge, so let me get on the solution side and state that a bit more positively.

To live an emotionally sustainable life, you must consistently deal with unresolved conflict instead of avoiding it.

Let me say that again - To live an emotionally sustainable life, you must consistently deal with unresolved conflict instead of avoiding it.

And by "conflict" I don't necessarily mean those situations where you are in a fight with someone, although that's obviously included. By "conflict" I mean situations where *you feel conflicted inside*.

For example, someone says or does something that hurts you or threatens you or makes you wonder if they're trying to send you a message about something, or just bugs you in some way and you feel a twinge inside; you experience some kind of negative reaction internally. That's what I mean by "conflict."

By "unresolved" I mean that you are unable to dismiss that conflicted feeling or twinge or negative reaction. Something is said, something is done and you try to give grace but you're unable to. You try to do what the Bible says that followers of Jesus should do whenever we feel hurt or offended ...

... like ...

Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Ephesians 4:32 (NIV)

... like ...

Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Colossians 3:13 (NLT)

You try to follow the example of Jesus who, even as he was being nailed to the cross ...

... was able to say ...

"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Luke 23:34 (NIV)

You try to do those things ... "Jesus forgave me, I should forgive them and let this go" ... "they didn't intend to hurt me; they didn't really know what they were saying or doing" – you try to dismiss the internal conflict you

feel without ever involving the other person ... but *you just can't*. Instead you feel a grind when you're around them. You find yourself having imaginary conversations with them in which you actually do share exactly how you're feeling. Or you go around discussing your feelings with everybody else but them.

That's what I mean by "unresolved."

And, I'm sure you know what I'm talking about because I'm sure this has happened to you. In fact, I would bet that you could make a list of two or three people with whom you live or work or play that you are experiencing some kind of unresolved conflict right this minute; some kind of internal tension over something they said or did that you have been unable to dismiss.

And what I'm telling you today is that, *in order to live an emotionally sustainable life, you have to deal with that instead of avoiding it*. And you have to *continue* to deal with things like that, continue to deal with unresolved conflict in your life. This has to become a pattern if you're going to live an emotionally sustainable life.

But that's not just *my* opinion. Back in August, a team of psychological researchers reported the results of a study in which it was determined that the sense of conflict that happens internally produces not only negative emotions (such as being upset or angry) but also physical symptoms, including nausea or aches and pains. And that's probably not too surprising.

But what *is* surprising, the researchers discovered, is that *avoiding* conflict was associated with having *more* of those symptoms the following day.ⁱ In other words, the conflict avoiders felt even worse both emotionally and physically the very next day. In addition – and this part's fascinating to me – the scientists discovered an alteration in their cortisol levels.

Cortisol, you may or may not know, is sometimes called "the stress hormone"ⁱⁱ because your body makes more of it whenever you're under stress.

As this diagram shows, Cortisol is what follows the initial adrenaline surge whenever some kind of tension first hits you.ⁱⁱⁱ Adrenaline rises and falls quickly, but cortisol tends to linger in your system and build up over time.

Now, typically, the level of cortisol is highest in our bodies in the morning, just after waking, and it declines throughout the day.

But what the study discovered was that the people who avoided conflict saw a *sharper rise* in their morning cortisol levels and a slower decline over time.

One researcher said, "These people (who had avoided conflict the day before) were less able to calm down over the course of a day."

On the other hand, those who went ahead and dealt with whatever conflict they were feeling actually saw a *lower rise* in their morning cortisol level the next day (and therefore, a lower overall stress level).

Incredible, isn't it, how our bodies respond to the way we handle unresolved conflict? Avoiding it isn't sustainable – even physically!

I think this is why God tells us in the scripture, for our own good, to deal with it. There are many places where he does so, but none more direct than what the Apostle Paul writes to the Ephesians.

He says ...

Having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another.

In other words, “no games ... no pretending everything is one way when it’s really another. Be honest, because in Christ, you have put away the kind of life that is not.”

Instead, Paul says ...

Be angry and do not sin;

... and goes on to explain what “anger without sin” looks like, in part.

*Do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.
Ephesians 5:25-27 (ESV)*

In other words, “when you’re feeling it, deal with it quickly” because if you don’t ... if you let it linger too long, you give an opportunity for the enemy of your soul to get in there and do his dirty work in your life. Sin – falling short and dishonoring God – will surely follow.

So, I think between the scripture and the research the point is pretty clear: by leaving conflict unresolved, you open the door for bigger problems down the road physically, emotionally and spiritually. To live a life that’s sustainable *in all of those ways*, you have to deal with unresolved inner conflict instead of avoiding it.

Why We Avoid

With that said, I guess the question is ... why don’t we? Why don’t we deal with things that we’re unable to resolve with forgiveness and grace – quickly, before the sun goes down?

Well, I think there are several reasons (beyond a lack of maturity) and I’ll just list them out very briefly. See if you can relate to any of them.^{iv}

1. We don’t deal with unresolved conflict because of personal insecurity.

We’re afraid we can’t communicate our thoughts and feelings very well, especially in the face of opposition, if the person doesn’t like what they’re hearing. Or maybe we’re afraid if we say something, we’ll be thought of as a whiner or get labeled as hyper-sensitive. Personal insecurity.

2. We don’t deal with unresolved conflict because of time pressure.

A lot of us are just too busy to engage in a dialogue with someone else that will, by definition, become very meaningful once we put this out there, whatever it is that’s bugging us. We can’t push pause long enough to go there and so we don’t. Time pressure.

3. We don't deal with unresolved conflict because of apathy and laziness.

The person with whom we have the conflict just isn't that important to us. Or we don't think it will make any difference in the relationship (and it might not). Or we just don't want to expend the emotional energy. Apathy and laziness.

Now, those first three reasons are variable depending on your personality or your situation. In other words, not everybody has those reasons for avoiding conflict. But, these next two? I think these are pretty universal reasons for not dealing with conflict.

4. Most of us lack good examples of what healthy conflict looks like.

What most of us have had modeled for us in our parents and in our institutions (including church, I might add) is one of two extremes.

On the one end, there's the "pretend everything is ok even when it isn't" model where you just stay quiet and hope that, like a boogie man in a scary dream, maybe it will go away in the morning. On the other extreme, there's the model where every little offense leads to a war with lots of yelling and screaming and fighting and maybe even some form of physical abuse.

These two extremes are what most of us have seen, and that influences us to be wary of conflict.

About a year after Jetta and I were married, we met Henry and Sandy at church and they quickly became our best friends. Sandy had grown up in a home where they played the pretend game. Her parents never had a conflict until one day, when she was a teenager, there was a big fight. The very next day, they announced that they were getting a divorce.

And that was the model she took into her marriage. So, one day, she and Henry had a fight and she freaked out. And Henry, who had grown up with a much healthier perspective of conflict couldn't understand his wife's reaction.

So he said, "what is the deal with you?" And, she said, "It took my mom and dad 15 years to get to this point, and here we are after just a year."

"Where do you think we are?" Henry asked.

"Well, now we're probably going to get divorced!" she said. And she was serious because that was the only model of dealing with unresolved conflict she had ever seen. You stuff it for years and years and years, then you blow up and it's all over.

What about you? What model have you grown up with? What have you seen in your life? What have you experienced? That's a very powerful force in your life and it'll take some work to overcome it.

5. The final reason for not dealing with conflict is fear of doing irreparable damage to the relationship.

Not necessarily that we'll cause the relationship to *end*, but that it will never be the same if we start dealing

with issues whenever they come up.

Many years ago, when we first started NHCC, I found myself in a position I had never been in before in my life. I was the boss. I had four or five staff people who reported to me. I was also the leader of a non-profit organization that was constantly living on the edge financially. (Not much has changed over 16 years!)

So, I was very afraid of doing anything that would rock the boat with our staff because I didn't want any of them getting mad and quitting because then (I told myself), people would think I wasn't a good leader so they would stop giving to support the church and the ship would go down. Isn't that crazy? I was afraid that by addressing conflict I would cause irreparable damage to the church.

Well, what happened was, we had one particular staff member at that time who I was afraid to confront. Things would happen over and over and I would fume on the inside but I'd put on a happy face outside, because that's what good Christian boys and girls are supposed to do. But, after about five years of living like that, I became a wreck.

But little did I know that the other people on the staff were also becoming wrecks, and so finally, one day, one of them came to me and, in tears, said, "Rick, you're the leader. You have to deal with this person and this situation because no one else can."

And then it hit me: I had avoided conflict for so long that the damage that was *actually taking place* was worse than the damage *I feared would take place*! So, I finally did what I had to do, which was terrible and quite unfair to the staff person in question that I had waited so long to try and address things. I still have lots of regret over it. I wish I could have a do-over on that.

Anyway, what about you? Who in your life are you not talking to because you fear it will cause irreparable damage? You can do that for a little while. But you can't do it long-term because it's not sustainable emotionally for you and, quite likely, for some of the people around you and maybe even the person you are avoiding.

Procedure or Person?

Now, at this point, I'm tempted to shift gears and spend some time talking to you about how to actually go about *doing it*: dealing with unresolved conflict. In fact, since that point about five years into our life together as a church, I've done more messages on how to *do* conflict resolution than I can count. And they're quite good, if I do say so myself.

So, this week, if you'll sign on to The City, I'll post links to some of those messages that I've done in the past and you can listen to them or read the manuscript and it will help you *with technique*.

But what I've noticed over the years – and this was hammered home during the pastor's retreat Jetta and I went to last summer – is that it's not so much about technique as it is about heart. It's not as much about the procedure as it is the person. I mean, once you become the kind of person who deals with unresolved internal conflict rather than avoiding it, the procedure is easy.

In fact, I'll just go ahead and give you the basic procedure so you can see how easy it is. Jesus spells it out in Matthew 18.

If your brother sins against you, go to him. Tell him what he did wrong. Keep it between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won him back.

But what if he won't listen to you? Then take one or two others with you. Scripture says, 'Every matter must be proved by the words of two or three witnesses.'

But what if he also refuses to listen to the witnesses? Then tell it to the church. And what if he refuses to listen even to the church?

Then don't treat him as your brother. Treat him as you would treat an ungodly person or a tax collector. Matthew 18:15-17 (CEV)

You can't assume the relationship is the same as it used to be. "Change the nature of your relationship with this person."

Now, obviously, Jesus is talking about dealing with other believers who offend you, but this procedure works very well with anyone. If the person isn't a believer, you find some other common authority instead of the church and you ask them to get involved.

And, there are other very wise things the scripture says about confronting someone.

For example, Jesus told us ...

First take the plank out of your own eye then you will see clearly [enough] to remove the speck from your brother's. Matthew 7:5 (NIV)

Great advice.

So, as I said, the procedure is fairly simple. But, today, we're not going to go into that because ...

What's more important than *mastering the procedure* to deal with unresolved conflict is *becoming the person who deals with unresolved conflict* ...

... becoming the person who looks at all the reasons that say "don't deal with it" and "puts them off" (to use Paul's phraseology) ...

- Becoming the man or woman who overcomes their personal insecurity;
- Who makes time for hard conversations even when time is hard to come by;
- Who rejects apathy and laziness;
- Who isn't guided by the unhealthy models they've seen through their life;
- Who doesn't believe the lie that wading into conflict resolution will cause permanent damage.

See, these are the real issues that hold us back in this, not procedure or technique (as important as those are). These are heart issues and we have to start here.

So, what does it take to become *the kind of person* who “deals with it” – and in a gracious and loving way? I mean, we all know people who “deal with it” all the time but they’re mean and self-centered. They’ll deal with it – and they’ll deal with you – because they just want to get their way. That’s *not* what we’re talking about.

As always, the answer is found in the Gospel, in the good news that the Kingdom of God – God’s presence and power – are at hand, Jesus said. It’s as much near and now to us as it is far and in the future. And Jesus told us to repent of believing lies about that and start believing the truth.

So, let’s start with that – with repentance.

1. I think we have to repent (and keep repenting) of wrong attitudes towards conflict.

For instance, I think a lot of us need to declare “the models I’ve seen all my life are wrong. And the conclusion I’ve made based on those models that ‘it’s best to just keep your mouth shut’ is wrong.”

After all, Jesus is the best model and his example illustrates that emotionally healthy men and women do not avoid conflict. Even a surface reading of the Gospels reveals that His life was *filled* with it! He was in regular conflict with the religious leaders, the crowds, the disciples—even his own family. He “dealt with it” often.

In fact, he once said it was more important than worship!

He said ...

If you are presenting a sacrifice at the altar in the Temple and you suddenly remember that someone has something against you, leave your sacrifice there at the altar.

Go and be reconciled to that person.

Deal with it – speak up – try to make things right.

Then come and offer your sacrifice to God. Matthew 5:23-24 (NIV)

Can you believe that? Sometimes, Jesus says, the most spiritual thing that you can do is to stop worshipping God and go deal with unresolved conflict!

So, I think we need to declare that the models we’ve seen are wrong, and the conclusion we’ve made based on those models that ‘it’s best to just keep your mouth shut’ is also wrong.

- I think we also need to declare that a lack of time to deal with unresolved conflict is a wrong ordering of priorities on our part.
- I think we need to declare that its hardness of heart and lack of love that makes us apathetic and lazy towards people who *for their own good* need to be confronted by someone. I know that was part of my problem in that situation 11 years ago.
- I think we need to declare that it’s lack of faith that causes us to fear doing what God clearly says we should do.

If we're going to become the kind of person who confronts instead of avoids (and lives an emotionally sustainable life!) we have to do what Jesus says – consistently repent of our way of thinking and believe God's way instead.

But that's only half of it because the Gospel also tells us that we don't have the power to change on our own. It says that we need to *receive before we can achieve*.

... that we need to receive something *from* God before we can ever achieve something *for* God.

So, if we're going to do what God says in this – if we're going to become the kind of person who “deals with it” instead of avoiding it, what do we need to receive?

Well, let me try to explain it like this: Has it ever occurred to you that you would never have been able to come to Christ as savior had God not confronted you with your sin? Have you ever thought of that? Has it ever hit you that without the Holy Spirit somehow, somehow breaking into your life and making you aware of how you have hurt Him and offended Him, you would never even have the thought of turning to Jesus as your savior? Did it occur to you this morning as you walked in the door that you wouldn't be here today if God didn't *continue* to confront you about the things in your life that need to change.

Here's the truth, friends: you and I are here – we belong to Christ – because we have been given the gift of confrontation. God, because of his great love, was willing to confront us in hopes that we might repent and turn to Christ. And He keeps on doing that for us again and again.

And because you have received the gift of confrontation (and you keep on receiving it as the Holy Spirit keeps on convicting you) you are now able to give it. You really are. Loved people are the ones who can love. Forgiven people are the ones who have the power to forgive. And confronted people, like you and me, have the power to confront. We really can.

But you won't believe that and act on it unless you ponder (and keep on pondering) this gift that God has given you. It won't sink in and change your heart.

So, that's the second thing I think we need to do if we're going to become the kind of person for whom “the procedure” is natural. Not easy, but natural.

2. Ponder (and keep on pondering) the fact that your own acceptance in Christ rests on a “willingness to confront.”

Not *your* willingness to confront *others* ... *God's* willingness to confront *you*! God was willing to confront you. And He continues to do so, so that your relationship with him can be what it's supposed to be. That's the gift that you and I have been given.

So, today, as we close this service, we want to take some time to do some pondering. And the way we're going to do that is through a time of communion.

Now, typically, when we do communion, we focus on the fact that Jesus died for our sins. The bread represents his body; the fruit of the vine represents his blood. But, even though all of that is true, we rarely stop to reflect on the fact we would have never received it had God not first graciously given us the gift of confrontation.

So, today, as you receive communion, I invite you to think about that. Ponder the fact that you and I on our best days didn't deserve for God to break into our lives and say, "hey, you have offended me. You have broken my laws. And, I'm telling you this because I want you to repent and receive the sacrifice of my Son as payment for the penalty of sin so that our relationship can be restored."

Maybe as you come to the table today you might try to remember what it was like when you first came to Jesus. Or maybe some time after that you wandered off the course and God called you back to Himself. Remember when the Spirit convicted you, confronted you, that you were a sinner in need of a savior ... and as you reflect on that, ponder that, rejoice in that gift as you commune with Christ.

Let's pray.^v

God,

I thank you that your word is clear. I thank you that you give us the power to do what you tell us to do and it's not just up to us. You actually give us the gifts that enable us to do and be who you want us to be. Even when it might bring hardship or embarrassment or difficulty, we believe that what you say about resolving conflict is right. We know it leads to joy and peace and will lead us to live emotionally sustainable lives.

And so I pray that you would empower us to put away every objection we might think of in regard to becoming the person who deals with conflict and reaching out in love to those who have injured us in some way. We're sorry for our hard heartedness and callous indifference to others. We repent for thinking or saying, "I don't need her, anyway" or "forget about him." We're sorry that our excuses have grieved your heart and grieved your Spirit because *these people matter to you*.

Help us, as we take this communion to remember that you were willing to confront us and our sin because *we matter to you*. Let this experience help us to be more like Jesus and less like the people we are in our natural condition. Let us commune with him and then reflect him as we deal with the unresolved conflicts in our lives.

Amen.

Endnotes

ⁱ See <http://www.livescience.com/culture/arguments-health-avoiding-conflict-100813.html>

ⁱⁱ See <http://stress.about.com/od/stresshealth/a/cortisol.htm>

ⁱⁱⁱ See http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Demystifying_Depression/The_Stress_System

^{iv} #1, 4 and 5 are from 12 Bad Habits That Hold Good People Back, pg 69-75

^v This prayer is based on the end of Dr. James McDonald “Always Resolve Now” message at http://www.walkintheword.com/downloads/AlwaysResolve_Booklet.pdf