

Title: Genuine Love Confronts Conflict in the Church

Subtitle: Spreading health to unwholesome environments

Video URL: <https://youtu.be/I8rIXuu3RUk>

What I find most endearing about the Bible is how God chose to portray people without apology in their raw and fallen state, for it does not shy away from telling the truth about ourselves. It shares these things because we need a firm grip on reality to honestly deal with the potential of sin in ourselves and others.

The Church on this side of heaven is not perfect. We are a fellowship of sinners who, because of our commitment to Christ, are on the road to spiritual maturity. Yet, we still have blind spots and need assistance and encouragement from others in this fellowship that we call “the Body of Christ.”

If Christianity teaches anything, it is that men and women are still called to be a part of God’s dream despite their faults and failures.

After my conversion experience in October of 1970, the first question I had, as a new believer, was, “What is the Church?” Then, to my surprise, the Christian friend I was talking to looked at me and said, “We are the Church.” With his answer, I realized that if I was to connect myself with God’s plan, I must also connect myself to his people, no matter how obvious their flaws might be. I could no longer distance myself from the Church but was called in my baptism to commit myself to its health and well-being. For good or bad, I was a part of the Church. For good or bad, I had to learn to relate to people I might not like. And when I see problems within the fellowship of believers, I am called to become part of the solution, for by doing nothing, I will become part of the problem.

When the Apostle Peter describes the Church in his first epistle, he uses the term “living stones”¹ as a metaphor for believers

¹ 1 Peter 2:5

who are the building blocks of God’s spiritual temple. The metaphor implies Christians are chosen, precious, and united in Christ. Notice that Peter doesn’t say “bricks.” Bricks are uniform in appearance and size, but no two stones are alike. Therefore, stones must be fitly joined together by a master artisan who has a glorious purpose and vision in mind. But the process is not without difficulty.

Conflicts are a normal part of our human relationships, but how we handle them makes all the difference. Thankfully, today’s Gospel gives us practical advice on handling those differences constructively. In it, Jesus says, *“If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one.”*² This admonition is not as easy as some may think. It requires some tough lessons to learn, not only about ourselves and others but also about life.

Life is much like getting into a bumper car at an amusement park. Anyone who gets into one of those cars knows you will get hit – you just don’t know how hard. And when you do get hit, you step on the gas pedal, chase the one who has hit you, and hope to bump that person harder than they have bumped you.

That may be a fun strategy for the amusement park, but it’s a terrible strategy for life. And just because it is our nature to bump back, it doesn’t mean we are not called to amend our ways.

Sin is a part of us, and if left unchallenged, it will negatively affect us and make the relationships we are a part of unhealthy and dysfunctional.

They say that cancer can be cured if detected in time, and the same truth could be applied to “cancers” growing in the faith community. Individualism or inward quietism that keeps silent in

² Matthew 18:15

the face of evil is not “minding your own business” in the name of Christ. It is an abdication of Christ-like love in our corporate experience and discipline. Therefore, in today’s epistle lesson, Paul calls us to **“Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.”**³ And just as a soldier puts on armor, so a Christian is to put on the Lord Jesus Christ with all the virtues of love, patience, and perseverance that his nature reflects.

Paul’s imagery sparked memories of one person’s first day in US Army basic training when he was given a box and ordered to put all his civilian clothes in it. The package was mailed to his home address. Every day after that, the uniform he put on reminded him that he had entered a period of disciplined training designed to change his attitudes and actions. And we, in like manner, need a new mindset as we take to heart the instruction Jesus gives us in the Gospel today:

*“If we go to our brother or sister and they listen to us, we have won them. “But if they do not listen, we are to take one or two others along so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the Church.”*⁴

Such corporate discipline may seem harsh and even out of date. Yet the painful process was always meant to be redemptive.

Recently, God called Ellen and I to put this admonition into practice, as we were both called to confront some offensive behavior we had witnessed in one of our relatives. We had bitten our tongues one too many times at family gatherings, and now was time to address the fallout. The encounter took prayer and courage, but to our surprise, our words were heard, albeit with some

³ Romans 13:14

⁴ Matthew 18:15-16

resistance. Ultimately, the meeting lifted the burden of silence we had endured for far too long.

We ventured into that encounter with some trepidation. Conflict is always challenging, and my natural tendency is to avoid it if possible.

I once had a person ask me, “How can I know if it is time to speak up and say something?” I responded with an insight from today’s epistle lesson, which says, **“Love does no wrong to a neighbor.”**⁵ And the Apostle Peter wrote, **“Love covers a multitude of sins.”**⁶ Therefore, I said, “When love can no longer cover a transgression, then that behavior needs to be addressed.” Then I assured him that words spoken in love will not ultimately harm but hopefully bring healing.

How we treat one another has enormous value in revealing the essence of who we are as children of God. Last week, our New Testament lesson from Romans urged, **“To let love be genuine.”**⁷ In commenting on this verse, Bishop Bane explained, “That means that we let go of those resentments and petty complaints about other people that are so much a part of this life.”⁸ But this week’s lessons take it one step further and show us what it means to be honest with ourselves and others as we attempt to speak the truth in love. Bishop Bane’s last week’s conclusion is also appropriate for today when he said: “When we make such decisions and take such actions, we notice something deep within us that just feels right and good. That is because when we have behaved in the way that represents our true nature as people created in the image and likeness of Almighty God.”⁹ *Amen.*

⁵ Romans 13:10

⁶ 1 Peter 4:8

⁷ Romans 12:9

⁸ The Rt. Rev. David Bane, Sermon for Proper 17 YrA delivered on September 3rd. 2023 at St. Mary Magdalene, Seven Lakes, NC.

⁹ Ibid.