

Pastor Kevin Garman

Theme: Conflict

Scripture: James 3:13-4:3

September 15th, 2021

“The Letter from James: Dealing with Conflict”

Last week we looked at chapter three of James’ letter and talked about the power our words hold over each other and how we can use words to build people up, not tear them down. This week our theme is understanding conflict as we continue to look at chapter 3 and begin chapter 4 of the Letter to James. Conflict is something we tend to avoid in the church. Some conflicts are avoided because they are petty or people assume them to be petty complaints that turn into bigger issues, and the church has plenty of conflict surrounding building decisions, future planning and events, and theology of both the congregation, and in our case as United Methodists, our district and conference. There is a lot of conflict we are continuously sifting through week to week without even noticing it.

Conflict is natural and, in some cases, necessary for communities to move past outdated, irrelevant ways of thinking and being in the world. However, conflict is not always a bad thing. A legend in the annals of American History, the late representative of Georgia, Rep. John Lewis, a freedom rider in the 1960’s and a legislator who tirelessly fought for voting rights of all marginalized communities to expand and protect voting rights for all Americans. John Lewis said this at the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma, Alabama, “Get in good trouble, necessary trouble, and help redeem the soul of America.” Our questions we look at today are much easier for me to formulate, given they come directly from James, when James asks the question, “What is the source of conflict among you? What is the source of your disputes? Do they come from your cravings that are at war in your own lives?”

I don’t have a story that I can connect to my sermons each week, but this week I have the perfect story. This happened in my first year of ministry at University Park United Methodist and I was under the tutelage of Rev. Paul Kotke, the senior pastor of University Park UMC. Paul was a mentor to me in my first year of ministry, and I always admired the way Pastor Paul carried himself. It didn’t matter if he knew you didn’t like him or if you were his biggest supporter, he treated each person the same way. He was also the type of leader that when he wronged and you let him know he had wronged you, he would listen to your pain, apologize, and do his best in the future to not say or do the harmful thing to you ever again. He was instrumental in my early ministry because he was someone who could provide support and foster the growth and development of an intrigued and curious mind of a young, green boy from Appalachia. He pushed me to think of ministry not as Sundays at 11:00 a.m. but every hour of every minute of every day is your true test and challenge in ministry. Ministry is about integrity and holding the space to authentic and honest about the world and the human experience by serving

God's creation to bring about a more wholesome, holistic, compassionate world. This lesson served me well in a lesson I learned about conflict through Rev. Paul Kotke.

It Scout Sunday in the fall, which was always a favorite day for Rev. Paul Kotke, an eagle scout, and a proud sponsor of the Boy Scout troop the church had sponsored for many years. However, on this Scout Sunday, Pastor Paul was very conflicted due to more and more cases of sexual abuse was being reported and investigated and the Boy Scouts of America were the prime suspects of abuse and negligence to report and investigate these credible claims independently. Rev. Paul gave an honest, authentic sermon that morning calling out the leadership of the Boy Scouts for not addressing these concerns sooner if they had been taking place for so long, but at the same time, Pastor Paul showed deep pain and empathy for the folks who were abused and mistreated. He displayed his frustration, anger, disappointment, and honest pain that morning. Honesty can get you into good trouble though.

Following the service, in his usual fashion, Pastor Paul stood at the edge of the sanctuary greeting the congregation members as they left the service one-by-one. I was the liturgist that morning and still pretty new to the community, so Pastor Paul wanting me to start my internship the next fall at University Park invited me to stand next to him to concluding the service. A gentleman who was not so gentle rushed forward with a red flush across his face. He looked at Pastor Paul with anger in his eyes, pointing his finger at Pastor Paul's face, and said, "You disrespected the boys scouts this morning and you turned your sermon into a political condemnation of an organization that I love and cherish. I don't appreciate that!" Everyone just paused for a moment as we were all shocked by the man's response to Pastor Paul's words, but Pastor Paul didn't hesitate for a second and turned to me immediately saying this, "Kevin, this is a moment of pastoral leadership and pastoral care. The man and his reaction is in something completely unrelated. I have been attempting to meet with him about a dispute he had months ago which is between he and I, but understand this, people will take their pain, anger, frustration, and guilt out on you. It isn't right and shouldn't be tolerated, but it is the nature of people who are in deep pain and turmoil. Brush it off your shoulder, talk to someone about it, process, and do whatever you need to do to realize this is a different conflict they are failing to address in their life and it's not your fault." He then looked at the next person in line and thanked them for joining us for worship. This lesson I learned that day helps me see and acknowledge the pain, frustration, and misappropriation of people who disagree with me or take things to the extreme in moments of duress and confusion.

The Letter of James doesn't have any fun screaming matches to reference or deal with any one specific conflict, but as we can see from the early church James is calling out in their behavior, the church has always been in conflict with each other. Bishop Oliveto says, "The church is made up human beings and all human beings make mistakes and all human beings hurt one another. The church is no different from the world we know and experience." The commentary in my Jewish Annotated New Testament say this, "Rabbis speak of "mahloket: (dispute; argument) and "qetatah"

(quarreling)...[this] suggests that humanity wants to do God's will but self-aggrandizement and Roman oppression prevent it" (JANT p 432). The conflict James is referring to is a deep seeded conflict in which factions are beginning to form in the church where people are becoming more divided than they are united. James isn't saying conflict is bad, but James is saying conflict can be caused by our own selfish ambitions, by our own envious desires, and by our own boastfulness for false truths (James 3:14 NRSV). James is implying too much conflict and conflicts of self-interest tears communities apart and is not the community God intends for us to become.

There are two important lessons I glean from this passage, which are humility and pride. Let's start with humility. According to James, and many other instances throughout scripture, humility is an expression of wisdom. If I was to describe someone who was wise, I would say they are people who are guided by past experiences, knowledge and theory, someone with a deep sense of emotional intelligence, and someone who has the ability to emotionally remove themselves from present situations to discern and deduce the most holistic outcome for all. Wisdom is undoubtedly born from growth and development in one's life. Even though wisdom is born from growing and strengthening oneself, wisdom is learned through conflict and disciplines being transformed and shifted into new ways of being and seeing the world. In other words, conflicts lead to transformations, which aren't always a bad or negative thing.

The second lesson I glean from this pericope of James is a lesson on pride. One of the wisest beings in all the universe is Master Yoda, and he says this, "When you look at the dark side, careful you must be. For the dark side looks back" (*Dark Rendezvous*). We become prideful in conflict when we are too proud to admit that we are wrong or only partially correct. We also become too prideful in conflict when our only objective is to be correct. Even though I am certainly not a proselytizer for Cartesian dualism, we all possess both good and evil within ourselves, and it is up to us to make the decisions to lean into the goodness of ourselves and the goodness of others to help heal this world and the conflicts we face. Please do not let your determination to figure out good and evil blind you from the neighbor in front of you reaching out their hand for help. When you are too busy trying to change your neighbor or convince them of their sin, pride has gotten in the way of your heart, and this is quite clear in today's gospel lesson as Jesus tells the disciples to be humble and to serve others. Pride finds no company in service to others because pride is a hardening of one's heart and a community who has become closed minded to the Spirit of God.

This is all great, but how is any of this practical and applicable to our lives? I will share the video on the Facebook page later this week, but the YouTube Channel Conscious Leadership summarizes conflict in a description of the drama triangle. What is the drama triangle? Well, as you can imagine, there are three points of conflict in the big drama triangle and three points of conflict within the smaller drama triangle inside. The three big categories are people who want to be the hero, are perceived as the villain, and those who call themselves the victim. Heroes say things like, "Let me do it everything! I know I can handle it." Villains say things like, "You should have done this

or you should have done it the way I have always successfully done it,” and the victim tells everyone why they feel powerless and it is everyone else’s fault. There is an alternative to the drama triangle though.

The alternative to the drama triangle is the hero being transformed into the coach who teaches people their vision and understanding as they motivate and use the skills of the people in front of them. The villain becomes the challenger who sees conflict as a way to transform the community to push the boundaries of what they are capable of to reach their full potential. Lastly, the victim becomes the creator who takes personal and communal responsibility for their actions and attempts to create the space they need to feel whole. The point of talking about the drama triangle is not meant to point fingers and determine who is who, and I would argue that it is not even meant to determine where you are necessarily. The point of the drama triangle is for us understand the basics of conflict and be aware of these roles we have all played in building our community. Don’t ask yourself whether you are the villain or hero, the creator or the victim, but ask yourself this question, “What will I do when I am faced with the realization of being the villain or the hero? What will I do to empower those around me to be creators instead of victims? What do I need to let go of or build into my discipline to be a better coach to my community?”

So how will you know you are in good trouble? Powerful people from on high that you have never heard of and never seen will let you know that you are speaking too much truth into the world and you should stop. I imagine this was said to John Lewis, among many other egregious and nefarious things, when he set foot on Edmund Pettis bridge in Selma, Alabama calling out this country and its leaders for the pain and suffering it had caused black and brown Americans since its founding and beyond. That takes courage, a strong sense of identity and values, and it takes the willingness of wanting to get into some good trouble for the sake of helping that neighbor who has their outstretched hand asking you for help.

My challenge to you this morning is this: Don’t just complain to your friends and on social media about all the troubles in the world, this state, and this community. Instead, I challenge you to go make a difference in your corner of the world. Become a monthly donor to help fund a project or cause you deeply believe and resonate with. Become a volunteer at a local or regional organization that is trying to build up your community. If the type of organization or vision doesn’t exist here, then you begin the work to make sure it is a voice that will one be heard in this community. Become someone who is a solution to the problems we face, not an antagonist from the margins or become apathetic to change. I challenge each of you as individuals and as a church community to become an advocate for change, a seeker of justice, and a disciple of Jesus Christ who seeks to transform the world by pursuing the values and the principles of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Go forth and build this community you seek. Amen.