

FAITH AND CONTROVERCY

JWB

I Samuel 8:4-14, 19-22 Mark 3:20-35

We might hope that the CHURCH would be a harbor or sanctuary of PEACE, devoid of all conflict and controversy.

The history of the church, however, does not support that wishful thinking. Emperor Constantine had a vision of the cross "With this sign conquer." And so he made a cross, his battle standard, and he prevailed over his enemies. This was how a persecuted minority became the dominant religion in a formerly pagan society.

Of course a reading of Paul's letters in our New Testament reveal that he was almost constantly embroiled in controversy in the churches he started. The principal quarrel was how to accept gentile converts in what had started out to be a movement within the Jewish faith. Do new (non-Jewish) believers need to be circumcised, or not?

Is there anything good about controversy? Is there something positive to be taken from conflict?

I think most churches would prefer to avoid any appearance of conflict, but any decision-making process (any choice between alternatives) involves a low level of conflict. Hopefully it can be done in an atmosphere of respect and genuine appreciation of other's views.

Our readings today may be instructive how Samuel and Jesus dealt with controversy

Samuel was the last and one of the greatest Judges for Israel. He was not just a “hero for the current crisis” like Sampson or Gideon. He also was a prophet, priest and wise counselor. In the time of the Judges, only God was king, and Samuel knew his place under God.

You can begin to feel Samuel’s consternation, after giving most of his life trying to be a faithful steward, leading Israel, but then having the people say, “everything you have done is fine, Samuel, but we still want a king like our neighbors.”

Wisely (instead of arguing and escalating the controversy), Samuel consulted with God in Prayer. And the answer he received was:

- 1) “Don’t take this challenge personally, Samuel. The people who are clamoring for a king are not rejecting you, but in fact are rejecting ME as their king. (Just like they have in every generation since I brought them out of Egypt.”
- 2) And surprisingly, God counseled Samuel, “Listen to the people. Warn them what will happen if they have a king. That is: your sons and daughters will be conscripted into the king’s service and you will pay taxes to support his kingdom—you will become his slaves; but when you cry out for mercy, I will not answer.”

But even though Samuel earnestly warned the people of the consequences of granting their desires, they adamantly clamored for a king. So God consoled Samuel: “You have been faithful, proclaiming the consequences of their misguided desires. Now it is time for them learn for themselves, what you have said is true. Give them their king.”

Even Jesus had to suffer misinterpretation, misrepresentation and having to deal with mis-directed expectations.

Our reading from Mark describes the personal pressures Jesus endured when the crowds discovered he could heal diseases—it says he could not even find time to eat. And when he sought respite by returning home, (1) the crowds followed him, (2) the religious officials accused him of being a servant of Satan, and (3) his own family tried to restrain and tone him down.

In the face of such a gross misunderstanding of what Jesus was trying to do—what should he do?

Again, like Samuel, it is safe to say Jesus is grieved, by people's responses to him—even his own family.

He does not, however, lash out and give them a 'piece of his mind.'

Instead he calmly reasons with them, pointing out how peculiar their assertion is, that Satan (the author of trouble) would war against himself by ending trouble.

But then, also like Samuel, he issues a very serious warning:

"Some of you would pervert my compassionate deeds of healing, by calling them evil or the work of Satan. To you I say, the only truly UNFORGIVEABLE SIN is to call something that is GOOD and of GOD, evil.

(When we are so set in our own ways, thinking we know what is God's will, but it is against God's love—as long as we persist acting against God, we are unforgiveable.)

Is there hope for us as we live in a time of heightened polarization and miscommunication, even within the church?

Decisions still need to be made. Differences need to be listened to, and explored if we would make the best of opportunities to grow.

Often the best course of action is so obvious it is easy to overlook.

There is a story of an orphaned boy who was living with his grandmother. While he was upstairs the house caught on fire. The grandmother died trying to rescue him.

The boy cried for help, but the flames were so intense that no one could get into the house to reach him. Finally, one man climbed up an iron drain pipe and then came back down with the boy holding onto his neck.

The boy lost his only family member in the fire. So, a public meeting was held to determine in whose family the boy should be placed. There were three good candidates. Each was given an opportunity to describe how they would provide a good home for him. One was a respected teacher. One family owned a farm. And one family was very wealthy. During all their presentations the boy's eyes remained focused on the floor. Then a stranger walked to the front of the room and slowly took his hands out of his pockets. The crowd gasped at the red scars on his hands, but the boy jumped from his seat, ran up and threw his arms around the man's neck. This was the man who had saved his life—the scars were from climbing the hot drain pipe.

The decision was made. Everyone agreed the boy should become a part of the family of the man who had saved his life.

Sometimes we need to take a step back and appeal for God's counsel and wisdom. It was one thing to win our independence from Great Britain, but quite another to get 13 diverse colonies to agree on a new form of government. The Articles of Confederation adopted in 1781, was heading toward bankruptcy, and was unable to address pressing social issues.

When a new Constitutional Convention ^{was convened} to re-define our national identity and correct these weaknesses, some old fears and of suspicions paralyzed discussions about how to form a fair representative body. The smaller colonies were sure the larger, wealthier colonies (Pennsylvania, Virginia, and New York) would try to dominate. And so discussion escalated into heated arguments. (It did not help that it was July without air conditioning.) The word "polarized" had not been invented, but you might recognize its description. At the close of another fruitless day of wrangling, Benjamin Franklin asked for a moment of personal privilege. He asked if the assembly might agree to start the next day's deliberations with a word of prayer. It was something they could agree on.

Cooler heads began to prevail and Roger Sherman offered his suggestion for two houses of legislation: a Senate with two senators from each state, and a House of Representatives, with proportionate representation. Suddenly there was something for everyone. It was adopted by the Convention and soon ratified by 10 of the 13 colonies. As we all know, it hasn't been perfect, but it has been a workable compromise when our leaders take time to listen.

So what can we say about conflict in our own time? We can be fairly certain that arguing, and especially name-calling, do not usually lead to a happy consensus. But good and creative compromises can emerge when people respectfully listen to one another. And there is a reason that Presbyterian meetings always are preceded with prayer. Amen.