

A sermon preached at  
Plymouth Presbyterian Church  
St. Helens, OR  
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Spotlight on the early church: Have you had any good church fights?  
Ephesians 4:25 - 5:2

We take another look at the early church as it dealt with a number of issues and challenges. Our passage today is about church fights. Pastor Steve Molin said this about dealing with the first fight he had with his wife.

I remember the first fight Marsha and I had as husband and wife. It was on our two month anniversary; I remember that specifically, because I have given her two red roses in a cheap glass vase. That evening, we had a tiff about something I thought was insignificant, Marsha did not. I hated conflict. I grew up in an alcoholic family and conflict was a horrible thing. Things got thrown around; sometimes it was words, sometimes it was pots and pans. So I avoided conflict like the plague. But Marsha was okay with conflict; in her family, conflict meant that some issue was being resolved.

So, two months in, Marsha is trying to fight with someone who will not fight. The more intense she becomes, the more I withdraw, until I finally went into the bedroom, crawled under a quilt, and assumed the fetal position. That's when Marsha dropped the cheap glass vase on the floor. And martyr that I was, I went out and began picking up the pieces of glass.

Today I want to address the issue of "church conflict" and "church fights." I assume that, when it comes to fighting, people in the church fall into one of three categories.

1. Those who have learned that it's okay – it's even healthy – to confront the people or issues with whom we disagree.
2. But there are others who believe, as Pastor Steve Molin did in that first year of marriage, that fighting is a bad thing. Perhaps we have had our share of church conflict in the past, and it has left such a mark upon our lives that we never want to do that ever again, so we just suck it up and avoid the uncomfortable issues altogether.
3. There may be a third group, a minority group, who seem to enjoy stirring the pot and drawing others into the fray, but thankfully, they are rare.

The conclusion I have come to is that, because the Church consists of flawed and sinful people like us, there will always be disputes, disagreements and differences of opinion in the Church. It's not a sin to disagree! It's not wrong to hold a position different from your neighbor, or your friends, or your spouse, or your pastor. This sort of thing has always been part of the Church. But it is how we handle our disagreement that matters. How do we treat those with whom we are at odds? Can we maintain respect, civility, compassion and love, even in the midst of the fight?

This is where the Church must distinguish itself from every other organization on the planet.

In this 4th chapter of Ephesians that we have read today, the Apostle Paul is addressing some conflict in the church at Ephesus. To be honest, Paul seems to be addressing the fact that the conflict was old, it was past, but the members of that church couldn't let it go; they were still

upset over some battle lost, some argument that didn't go their way, and still punishing their church friends. I have seen congregations, and so have you, where members sit on opposite sides of the sanctuary, or go to a different service, because years ago they disagreed at an annual meeting. Someone wanted red carpet in fellowship hall, someone else wanted green. And ten years later, they are still upset with each other. In some instances, the issue was more critical; it was about the treatment of a pastor, or the treatment of some racially different visitors, or the decision to not renew support of a missionary. Whatever the conflict was about, reconciliation never fully happened, and this open wound festers for years and even generations.

This is where Paul begins today; with a recipe for getting past old conflicts and fractured church relationships. And he begins with a rather odd statement: "Be angry, but do not sin."

People of Ephesus would recognize this as a quote from Greek philosopher Pythagoras. Apparently Paul believed that anger was an acceptable emotion, even for Christians but, with a qualifier. It was all right to feel passionate about an issue, to argue a point with enthusiasm. But when our passion is hurtful to someone else, then we have crossed the line. When our focus is no longer on the issue, but begins to attack the person, then we have gone too far. And when the argument is over, when the issue has been decided, Paul says we must let it go, and move on. So Paul adds this point to the Pythagorean rule; "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger." That is to say, at the end of the day, you leave the conflict behind. You forgive, and forget, and move forward.

In my first congregation, there were a couple of curmudgeons eighty-something church members. They would clamor and snipe at each other through every annual meeting; they were never on the same side of any issue. Yet, immediately following the meeting, these two best friends would drink coffee and eat donuts in Fellowship Hall, and laugh. They were the personification of Paul's words "Do not let the sun go down on your anger. This is, incidentally, good advice for husbands and wives, as well. When we are at odds with our partners and engage in some battle, at the end of the day, when our heads hit the pillow, we forgive each other, so that the next day can begin fresh. Paul says this is how it must also be for church members.

He picks up this thought of old fights and festering wounds five verses later, more directly this time. "Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice..." Remember that Paul is writing this letter from a Roman prison, and his audience are members of a church just like this one. He had heard that the Christians were behaving badly. Very badly! Listen to the words he uses; bitterness, wrath, anger, slander, malice. Among fellow church members! And Paul says "this has got to stop!"

What issue could be so important in a church that would cause members to feel wrath toward one another? What argument is so compelling that it would cause Christians to slander one another, lie to one another, act maliciously toward one another. When we are in a loving and peaceful congregation like this one has been, it's hard to imagine. But if you've been in a congregation where there is a fight brewing, you know that it can happen. A small issue festers and grows into a larger one...and it is usually about the pastor, by the way!

Speed Leas, that master of church conflicts, says that

- 23 percent of church conflicts erupt because the pastor is apathetic or unwilling to take leadership, and
- 23 percent of the conflict comes because the pastor is too strong and authoritative. Another
- 6 percent don't like the pastor's preaching,
- 12% don't think the pastor is working hard enough, and
- 9% think the pastor is mentally ill!

Add 'em up: that's 73% of church conflict appears to be centered around the pastor.

And there's the problem; that if 50 people are upset with the pastor about something, there's another 50 people who think that the pastor is wonderful, thoughtful, spiritual and loving. And that's where the conflict often begins. It becomes personal very quickly, and people's emotions are difficult to contain. That's why Paul exhorts his readers to let it go. Let the bitterness and malice go. They have no place in the Body of Christ.

Paul says "Instead, be kind to one another. Simplistic, isn't it? That we can settle a church fight by simply being kind to one another?"

And this is how it is in the church. We are family. Over the years, we get to know each other well. We forget that the issues that we fight are never as important as the relationship we share. Paul reminds us to be kind to those we love, to be tenderhearted, and to forgive. It is not simplistic advice, it is a biblical admonition. We are not only brothers and sisters, but we are examples to the world as to how the people of God care for one another. What they see in us will lead them to conclusions about Jesus Christ. If they see malice, slander and bitterness, they will choose to have no part of the Christian faith, and who can blame them? But if they see tolerance, kindness and forgiveness, they will get a glimpse of a God of grace. How did that bible camp song say it? "They'll know we are Christians by our love."

I am so thankful for this congregation. In the eight months that I have been here, we have been family to one another. We may have disagreed, but we have not fought with one another. We have had different opinions on issues, but the sun has never gone down on our anger. When we have heated conversations, insult and injury and division has not evolved. I thank God for that. And for you. And I pray that this Body of Christ will continue to be imitators of God, loving and caring one another so that we can be about his work of loving and caring for others.

So, have you seen any good church fights lately? Not here.

Not here! Thanks be to God.