

“Difficult Conversations”
Philemon 1-21

Toward the end of the church service, the minister asked, “How many of you have forgiven your enemies? One small elderly lady raises her hand. “Mrs. Jones? How is that you have managed to forgive all your enemies?” “I don’t have any.” She replied, smiling sweetly. Mrs. Jones, that is very unusual. How old are you?” “Ninety – eight,” she replied. “Oh, Mrs. Jones, would you please come down in front and tell us all how a person can live 98 yrs and not have an enemy in the world?” The sweet little lady tottered down the aisle, faced the congregation, and said: “I outlived all of them.”

How do we deal with disagreements? How do we look at those who are on the complete opposite side of us, especially when we know that what is at stake is justice and the lives of many? It is one thing to disagree with someone about a movie review or a kind of food that you like. It is a totally different story when the stakes are high. We have learned to be polite about small disagreements, but how do we deal with the big issues of our lives and our world? We don’t have to look very hard in our world to see some examples of people in disagreement. This maybe the case even in your own home or workplace! Disagreement is part of life because being wrong about things is also very human. The problem comes from the way we deal with our disagreements. We do not seem to have a lot of shining examples of people in disagreement who deal with each other with respect and care. In fact, most of the time we are taught to see people who disagree with us as evil or at least as bad people.

This struggle struck me during my recent visit to Gettysburg and my time in visiting some of the sights of the Gettysburg battle of 1863 of the Civil War. I kept thinking to myself, “How could the Confederates not have known that they were wrong about slavery? How could they have fought and killed people in order to defend such a horrible practice?” But one day while visiting one of the museums of the Civil War, it finally hit me and I found myself asking, “Would I have been able to see things differently if I was born in the South at the time?” Of course this is a hypothetical question. But this kind of question haunts me from time to time as I think about the struggles for justice in our world today and even in my personal disagreements with others. How do I know that I am right and that others are wrong? And if I know that I am right, how do I deal with those on the other side?

It is always easy to look back in time and judge who was right and who was wrong and align ourselves with the winners. It is much harder to deal with the issues and disagreements of our day without the luxury of hindsight. Look at the current struggles with people fanning the flames of conflict on both sides. One sad example is the conflict in New York City over the building of an Islamic Center near the sight of the 9/11 terrorist attack. People on the streets are shouting at each other spewing hatred so freely because they are convinced that this is the way to justice for their cause.

So how are we as Christians to deal with such disagreements? Our Bible story from the letter to Philemon can give us tremendous help as a strong example of a Christian model of engaging differences. The Apostle Paul is writing to Philemon and the church community that meets in his home about a very difficult social issue, namely slavery. Philemon had owned a slave by the name of Onesimus who had escaped and found his way to Paul who embraced him and took him in as a brother in Christ. What Paul was doing in this letter was engaging Philemon in a conversation about freeing Onesimus. First century slavery was not dependent on race. Roman slavery included prisoners of war, sailors captured by pirates, or children who were sold into slavery by their parents because of poverty. In that time period slaves were allowed to buy their own freedom. What is interesting in this specific case of the slave owner, Philemon, and the

slave, Onesimus, is that both of them were Christians. Both of them believed in and followed the way of Christ. Yet, somehow the domination system of slavery was still a major blind spot for Philemon and many in his church. The Apostle Paul does not deny that Philemon was a true Christian in his heart because he was still practicing slavery. What Paul does is engage Philemon in a conversation that comes out of the heart and that takes the love of Christ very seriously. Paul reminds Philemon that in Christ, Onesimus is no longer a slave, he is a brother. Our faith in Christ challenges and transforms our understandings of power and community. But the key to all of this is Paul's willingness to engage Philemon in respectful conversation. This is the most important lesson for us today from this letter to Philemon. Engaging those with whom we disagree in heartfelt respectful conversations is the key to our ability to live in Christ's way. This is, of course, not easy when deep feelings and high stakes are involved. However, it is truly the only way to being open to the redeeming work of God's Spirit in our communities. In an article written for the book *Making Peace with Conflict*, Carolyn Schrock-Shenk writes: "Differences are to be expected, acknowledged *and affirmed*. Conflict opens the door to new truth and understanding. Try taking all the conflicts out of the Bible, ... What remains is a skinny volume indeed. If we truly believe this we can begin to understand conflict settings as holy ground, as places where God is present in powerful ways, as opportunities to gain new insight and understanding. Imagine how different our conflicts could be if we could move from an 'Oh dear, how terrible' to 'what is God trying to say to us?'"

But the key to all of our conflicts turned into opportunities for transformation is not only knowing what is right or wrong. It is our ability to explore our differences with openness, love and respect that makes the difference. Native Americans have known the value of this kind of dialogue for centuries. In his book, *Earth Medicine: Ancestors' Ways of Harmony for Many Moons*, Jamie Sams writes, "Whenever Native Americans come together in groups with things to discuss, there are certain rules that we always observe. Those unspoken rules show whether the participants were reared in a good way. No one has to make a comment about another person's behavior; it is evident through their actions. Listening is the foremost rule that determines a person's integrity and substance. Talking Circles are what we use to bring problems out into the open, to find solutions, to share our feelings and experiences, and to honor the Sacred Points of View of every person present. To interrupt a speaker is to bring dishonor on his or her words, to bring dishonor on one's upbringing, one's family, Tribe, Clan, and Nation." Imagine the power of healing and love in our communities if we are able to come together and talk with openness and respect about our problems while trusting that each one of us is created in the image of God and each one is a child of God.

So, why do we not do this? Why do we resort to arguments, hate, and violence? The simple answer to this is because it is much easier to disengage from those on the other side than to engage them. Real respectful dialogue in times of conflict requires a lot of time and a lot of hard work. We are busy and we want progress and solutions without having to spend years in dialogue. But the way of Christ invites us to this realm of commitment to live in the ways of love even when people on the other side are completely wrong.

In 2001 the General Assembly of our denomination formed a theological task force on Peace, Unity and Purity of the Church. The commission consisted of 20 Presbyterians intentionally representing the diversity of views and backgrounds of our church. They were asked to examine and make a statement about issues of disagreement among Presbyterians: Biblical authority and interpretation, Christology, ordination standards, and power. One of the most difficult issues that this taskforce had to deal with is the issue of homosexuality as it relates to ordination of

deacons, elders and pastors. Of course, many people believed that the task that was given to this committee was impossible. How could a group with such different views come together and come up with a statement that they can all agree on. The group met and worked for four years and the impossible did happen. The group was able to come up with a report that was approved by the General Assembly in 2006. At the heart of their work and report is an invitation to honest and respectful engagement with one another. Even though the group did not come to a final conclusion on all of the issues discussed, they were able to set a path before all of us of how to deal with disagreements. The best part of this process is the ability of conservative and liberal Presbyterians to connect with each other and to see each other as sisters and brothers in Christ working together to serve God and the world. The Task force invited all Presbyterians to learn that our unity as Christians is not about agreeing with each other on everything. Our unity is dynamic and is centered on our commitment to a deep relationship with Christ and with one another. They also invited Presbyterians to learn how to develop new processes that will move us from a win/lose debate to a genuine process of seeking discernment with one another.

The letter to Philemon and the work of the Task Force are specific examples of how Christ's love can transform our hearts so that we may strengthen our ability to follow in God's way of love. We need each other in order to be open to hearing the voice of God. Our conflicts and disagreements create the space for us to open up to new revelations. I want to invite you to think about your personal life and even your work life, what conversations can help you open the doors of your heart to new revelations? In times of disagreement, do you take the time to pray and engage those on the other side to truly listen and share stories of life and faith? This attitude of openness to the long and hard process of dialogue is what can move us from antagonism to loving engagement with those with whom we disagree. Most therapists affirm that there are two basic intentions you can have in communication: To protect and defend (closed) or to understand and learn (open). All the different ways you can handle conflict grow out of these two intentions. In Christian terms we may want to say that our intentions can be based in our love for God or in our fear of others.

As we live in Christ and breathe God's love every day, we can learn to act and engage with others out of that place of love, even when we need to have those difficult conversations. The invitation is always before us to see Christ in all people, especially when it is hard to do so. The story is told about a great spiritual teacher who was overweight. One day when he was sitting under a tree, a young soldier, trim and handsome, came along, looked at the teacher, and said: 'You look like a pig!' The teacher replied, 'Well you look like God!' 'Why would you say that?' asked the rather surprised young soldier. 'Well,' replied the teacher, 'we see what's inside us. I think about God all day and when I look out that is what I see. You, obviously, must think about other things. May we always have the presence of Christ in and among us to help us in times of difficult conversations. Amen.