

Session 6: Transforming Conflict and Celebrating Community

Conflict Often Needed for Peace

God's peace (shalom) is about the flourishing of compassion and justice. God's peace is not defined by the absence of conflict.

In all these situations, conflict results from betrayals, contrasting beliefs, injustice, fear, prejudice, greed, or distrust. Often, blaming conflict as the problem becomes a means to avoid addressing what has caused the conflict. When we engage the causes of conflicts, and not just the manifestations of conflicts, we are more likely to heal ancient and current wounds. God's peace (shalom) is about the flourishing of compassion and justice. God's peace is not defined by the absence of conflict. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, God calls prophets to oppose the cultural practices and ruling authorities whose indifference and greed cause people to suffer.

Conflict as Prerequisite

Conflict is not only a means to peace, but often a prerequisite for peace. We need to befriend conflict in a healthy way.

Conflict provides opportunities for understanding, healing, and new beginnings of trust and collaboration for a creative future. In befriending conflict, we open our minds and hearts to transformative insights about ourselves, about our relationships, and about conflict.

Good Trouble

Conflict can be a transformational activity for getting into what congressman and civil rights activist John Lewis called "good trouble."

Your Conflict Style

Where are you on the conflict spectrum?

We have benchmarks to gauge our relationship with conflict. When you reflect on various settings where conflict occurs—job, church, extended family, public meetings, one-on-one relationships—where are you most willing to actively engage with conflict? What subjects—sexuality, race relations, politics, religious convictions, money—do you resist discussing if feelings in the room are intense? How different is your emotional reaction when you are the focus of a conflict and not just a discussant about a conflict? What identity groups, different from your identity, do you avoid for fear of conflict? Reflecting on your answers can bring forth insights on the circumstances that influence your readiness to befriend conflict.

Listening in Conflict

Enter conflict with a listening ear.

A simple practice is to restate what someone says so they feel heard. I am fairly conflict avoidant and I have found that if someone feels heard, they are more willing to enter into conversation and listen in response. That said, for me, I need to see listening as a spiritual practice—and in many cases to not expect to be heard in return. I say that as someone who grew up in a system where it mattered that you have the last word. I have found that often leads to escalation, and not mediation.

Know Yourself

Understand your patterns in conflict.

It is important to do serious work on ourselves to understand how we handle conflict. I do think that the enneagram is a great tool for that. It is very helpful for people to see how and more importantly why they engage in conflict and to understand many of the reasons other are motivated to engage in conflict. If we assume that others engage for the same reason we do, then we start out speaking different languages. If we can imagine the differences even those in our family have around conflict, can you imagine the vast differences and understanding when moving across identity boundaries? When different cultures, experiences and expectations come into play? Coming into these conversations with humility, a listening and discerning attitude, and a deep desire to follow the Spirit can make all of the difference.

Frederick Douglass

If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are [people] who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one;

Healthy Conflict & Forgiveness

Have you learned how to engage in healthy conflict? If you haven't done work on it, you may not be as good as you think you are!!!

A key part of befriending conflict is to also befriend forgiveness. We need to deeply practice forgiveness. Dr. Smith in his book talks about the forgiveness by the Amish when a gunman went into a one room schoolhouse and shot 10 girls. He also shares about the forgiveness of families in the 2015 shooting at the Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church at a Wednesday night Bible study.

For people of faith, forgiveness is fundamentally about being available to God, rather than being stuck in anger, bitterness, and desire for revenge. Revenge can motivate body and mind to wreak havoc on an enemy. Whatever satisfaction comes from its accomplishments will eventually sour before the gaze of our true selves. Revenge ultimately betrays who we are called to be for God and one another. Just as our personal lives falter from being driven by revenge, justice and beloved community do not arise from revenge.

Smith, Jr. , Luther E.. Hope Is Here!: Spiritual Practices for Pursuing Justice and Beloved Community (p. 196). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

Forgiveness is Internal

Forgiveness does not require anything from the other party. Many of us have preconditions for us to forgive someone—they need to show remorse, or offer an apology, or be appropriately punished. But the reality is that when we don't forgive, we are the ones who are often deeply punished.

Nelson Mandela

As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison.

Practicing Forgiveness

Forgiving even “before an offense ever occurs” was included in the training of civil rights marchers.

Learning to forgive takes time and practice. There are spiritual practices that you can take on that will help you to learn to forgive. One Amish mother, when asked, shared that she had been learning to forgive her entire life. Through storytelling and remembering, she knew the importance of it, had practiced it, and that gave her the strength and ability to do it.

Forgiving even “before an offense ever occurs” was included in the training of civil rights marchers. Dr. Bernard Lafayette, who worked with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., told me that marchers were trained to forgive the anticipated abuse of police and White mobs before they marched. The nonviolence commitment of the civil rights movement had the spiritual practice of forgiving enemies as a prerequisite to protest.

Smith, Jr. , Luther E.. Hope Is Here!: Spiritual Practices for Pursuing Justice and Beloved Community (p. 200). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

I see a cycle of actions that enables us to be transform so that we can help the Spirit transform the world

- Envisioning a future of compassion and justice can inspire us.
- Working for such a future will require us to befriend conflict.
- Transforming conflict will bring us friends and enemies.

Love as Foundation

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable; it keeps no record of wrongs; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. (1 Cor. 13:4–8a)

Reflection

How good are you at the idea of forgiveness? What kinds of offences lead you to needing to forgive? Are you practicing forgiveness of small things so that if/when something big happens you are more able to forgive?

Celebrating Community

Community is critical for us to learn to recognize suffering and to be able to intervene in places and communities experiencing injustice and oppression.

Creation as Community

Nature as a visible example of the interconnectedness of humans in community. I loved how Smith highlighted creation as the first community—how we are called to look at the interactive needs of creation and see how similar that it to human community. We are all impacted by the interconnectedness. Nature speaks to our hearts in ways that can be hard to put into words.

Discussion

Where in nature do you see interconnectedness?

FPCA Community

Where have you experienced community at FPCA?

Closing: Your Next Step

Do you need to widen your “cloud of witnesses” for more diverse voices?

Do you need to practice recognizing God’s work in our world?

Do you need to practice your contemplative practices like prayer or discernment?

Do you need to practice prophetic remembering?

Do you need to explore crossing identity boundaries?

Do you need a better understanding of your relationship with conflict?

Do you need to practice forgiveness for something big or small?