

**Sermon: Church Fight!** (September 20, 2009 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost)

There was a feud between the Pastor and the Choir Director in a congregation. It seems the first hint of trouble came when the Pastor preached on *dedicating yourselves to service*. The Choir Director chose to sing: "*I Shall Not Be Moved*".

Trying to believe it was a coincidence, the Pastor put the incident behind him. The next Sunday he preached on *giving*. Afterwards, the choir squirmed as the director led them in the hymn: "*Jesus Paid It All*".

By this time, the Pastor was losing his temper. Sunday morning attendance swelled as the tension between the two built. People love a good fight, even in church. A large crowd showed up the next week to hear his sermon on the sin of *gossiping*. Would you believe the Choir Director selected: "*I Love To Tell The Story*"?

There was no turning back. The following Sunday the Pastor told the congregation that unless something changed he was considering resignation. The entire church gasped when the Choir Director led them in: "*Why Not Tonight*."

And so no one was surprised when the Pastor resigned a week later; explaining that Jesus had led him to this congregation and Jesus was leading him away. The Choir Director could not resist. Do you know what hymn he chose? "*What A Friend We Have In Jesus*."

Seriously, though, this joke is a good illustration of the kind of in-fighting that sometimes goes on in Christian churches. We don't like to always think of it this way, but the church is as much a human institution as it is a divine one, and like all human institutions it has its power struggles. We cloak these struggles beneath a cloak of "niceness" and surface amiability, but they're there, and they're real, in every congregation I've ever seen.

When you look at churches who are in good financial shape, have lots going on, but who don't seem to be able to keep a minister for more than a couple of years, you can just about bet that it's at least in part due to power struggles within the congregation. One group vies with another to have more influence within the congregation, perhaps to have more influence over the minister - the clergy-person often becomes a pawn in a congregation's power games. One group likes the minister, one doesn't, and if one group manages to get rid of the minister, they win the game!

Sometimes the minister is an unwitting part in these struggles, or their unwilling victims. I heard of one board member who told his minister that the congregation had hired him, and they could fire him if the minister didn't do what this particular board member wanted (which, by the way, isn't entirely true!). At other times, clergy are far from innocent victims. Perhaps they have allied themselves with one group over another; perhaps the minister is too fond of his own position of authority to be able to work well with lay leaders; perhaps she likes to think that her ordination puts her a step above everyone else in the congregation. Clergy folk are human, like all the rest of the congregation, and though we are encouraged to develop skills to notice these kinds of patterns and avoid them, not all of us are good at it - and certainly none of us are good at it all of the time!

There are lots of ways congregational power struggles play themselves out. The most obvious way is what social scientists call "triangulation": picture two people, Person A and Person B, who have a disagreement about something in the church. Person A doesn't go to Person B to discuss the disagreement; she goes to Person C - or even people C to Z - to express the concern - either to just get it off her chest, or to create allies for her side of the disagreement. There's an illusion in the

church that it's somehow "nicer" not to speak to people directly about issues; yet the damage done by this kind of triangulation is enormous, and can take years, and even decades, to heal. Meanwhile, Person A may not even be aware of the disagreement – or maybe he's doing his own triangulating, trying to get people on *his* side.

The Epistle to James has not always been popular among Protestant theologians, because it focuses so much on the action part of living out the faith. "Works righteousness" is what they call it – they say James encourages too heavy a reliance on one's own ability to do the right thing, and not enough on the grace of God. But practical advice for daily living is exactly what many of us want! I can't imagine much more powerful a passage than this one, that closely precedes our reading for today (from James chapter 3)

*"Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a very small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire."*

You can see the damage done by the careless or spiteful tongue both in and outside the church. You see it in the Chambers of Commerce, the town councils, you see it in volunteer organizations and sports teams, music and drama clubs and school - all over. We human beings like to control our environment - we like things to go our way - and sometimes that means if things don't go our way, we will do our best, whether consciously, or otherwise, to put a stumbling block in the road of those who have chosen to go a different way. The tongue is only one tool we may use in this struggle, though a very powerful one.

It's not a popular thing to point out, but power struggles even happen in marriages. When I did my own pre-marriage counselling with couples, one of the things I used to talk about was power in the marriage relationship. I asked them to draw the layout of their house and yard, and then label each room as to where they felt like they had more power, equal power, and lesser power - then we talked about how we might even some of that out. Who makes the decisions about money? Who gets more time with the kids? Who's in charge in the bedroom? Or the garage? Or the kitchen? If there is a real power imbalance over-all - if one person feels like he or she always comes second in the relationship - then that marriage is going to be in trouble. Think about it – how many times have you heard someone say, "Well, I can see who wears the pants in *that* family!" *That* is an expression of power imbalance.

If you don't like the word power, exchange it with words like influence or authority; But the wish for recognition, the wish to be above others, the wish to have one's own way and to control those around us - that's the kind of thing Jesus is talking about with his disciples. They're arguing over who is the greatest disciple: Is it Peter, with his status as right-hand man? Is it Judas, the one who holds the purse-strings? Is it the disciple whom Jesus loved? Each has their own gifts, so each has reasons why they believe they should be the greatest disciple - a position which presumably would entail more recognition, higher status than the others, perhaps a larger share in decision-making for the group, and maybe, in their own minds, a position of power in the kingdom that Jesus would bring.

Jesus just told them - again ! - that the path he was walking would lead to his death - yet here they are, squabbling over some imagined glory in a kingdom that won't be at all what they have tricked out in their own minds. So Jesus does what a lot of preachers would do - he gives them an object

lesson. That's when you take something out of real life and say - look, learn some lessons from this. In this case, he brings a child into the midst of the arguing disciples, and says: "Look at her! Unless you welcome those like her, you're never going to even make it into the kingdom." And all the disciples go: "Huh?!"

One thing you should know is that the people of Israel at that time didn't have the idealized view of children we sometimes have. Of course, they loved their children, but as a whole, society didn't value them until they were old enough to be productive labourers. So this is another example of Jesus taking someone who isn't much valued by the world he lived in and saying: "Look! This one has lessons to teach you!" In other words, the disciples need not only to welcome those who are seen as having little worth in the eyes of the community, they must serve like them, in order to enter the kingdom.

Jesus is setting up a contrast to heighten the ludicrousness of what the disciples are doing. It is sheer folly to worry about power and recognition when one is seeking the kingdom of God - which is, after all, what we Christian people are about: God's values reigning on earth as in heaven. The only way to reach the kingdom is to stop worrying about worldly matters of who is more important than whom or about getting our own way, and to start thinking about God's concerns. And the way to do this is to open your hearts to the things and people who matter to God, and to serve them in love.

When all of us are more worried about what we can do for the people in our community and for the body of Christ than what they can do for us, our churches, our relationships, and our communities will be much, much healthier. Considering the needs of others, looking for ways to make their lives more blessed, gets us oriented toward kingdom-living : living in such a way that God's will is done "on earth as it is in heaven". For it was Jesus who said that whatever we do for the least of his brothers and sisters, we do for him. Many recent theologians have suggested that "kin-dom" rather than "kingdom" is a better word for what Jesus expressed – a hope for a place and a time when all truly see each other as part of one well-loved family.

The next time you are unhappy with someone in the church, or your family, or your workplace, or wherever, then you might want to ask yourself: Is this a "kingdom" issue? Is this about justice, or compassion, or wholeness, or peace-making? And if it is, then how can I express my own thoughts or disagreement in a loving and respectful way?"

Together, as committees and Boards of the church some time ago, we committed to treat each other with Holy Manners – we made promises about how we will behave as a congregation. I've asked members of various groups in the church to share those words with you now:

- ◆ We will take time for prayer and seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit
  - ◆ We will seek to build each other up and not tear down
  - ◆ We will speak in the first person I and from our own experience
  - ◆ We will allow each other equal air time
  - ◆ We will listen for understanding especially when we seem to disagree
  - ◆ We will seek to discover what is best for our church as a whole not what may be best for us or for some small group in the church
  - ◆ We will accept disagreement conflict and evaluation as normal and natural
  - ◆ When conflict arises we will go directly to a person with whom we are having a problem as a first step
- Matthew 18 15 17

- ◆ We will be accountable to each other and to the larger congregation
- ◆ We will respect our leaders and officers in the work they do on our behalf
- ◆ We will honour the diversity of gifts and skills of clergy and lay young and old and be open and welcoming of newcomers in our midst

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My hope is that these promises will shape the life of the whole congregation, not just the committees and boards of our church.

Lay or clergy, professionals or labourers, children or adults, all will be judged by how we treated those whose paths we crossed. Thank heavens, we will be judged with love. But unless we make our goal one of humble service and committed love, we will have a hard time facing Jesus, who loves us so deeply, who is both Lord of All and Servant of All. Amen.