

“Practicing Christian Assertiveness”
Matthew 4: 12-23; 1 Corinthians 1: 10-18
Rev. Dr. Andrew L. McDonald
The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
January 26, 2020

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Assertiveness is basically a mentality, a deep inner conviction that one is a creature of inherent worth and a loved one of God. That mentality can then become a skill through practice. – Hugh F. Halverstadt

So, it is flu season. I believe in science based medicine, and science shows vaccinations matter. There is also a herd immunity: the more people are immune, the healthier everybody will be. I think need to inoculate themselves once a year before flu season. So make sure you get your shot.

I think there is something else we need to inoculate ourselves for probably once a year. Paul points to it in his passage in Corinthians. Paul has heard about it hundreds of miles away. Yikes! A church conflict. So he inoculates the church: he found a theological way to help them think their way to be immune to conflict. We feel what we think.

Maybe you have heard the saying, “There is no fight meaner than a church fight.” Is that true? I don’t think so. Think about families: If we are being candid, families have lots of conflicts. They can go on for generations.

Take a look at Facebook: friends can end up in conflicts open to the whole world. Or look at stories on the news: the business section, the sports section, the fashion section, there are stories of major conflicts every day, not to mention local politics, state politics and sometimes it can even happen in national politics. This week we see: even the Queen of England has to deal with conflict. And just about every conflict can be pretty mean, even destructive.

So no, church fights are not nastier than any other conflict. Let’s just put that platitude to bed. It’s false. It is just that we put so much hope into churches that when there is a conflict there, maybe it hurts more than many other places. And I think churches need to inoculate themselves once a year, and remind ourselves of who we are, and how we treat one another. No, I am not addressing anything specific. It’s just time for our shots.

Conflict, when done well, can be positive. It can help us move forward. Let me lift up a positive example of conflict in a church. At the Presbytery of Twin Cities yesterday. One of the items of business was the closing and distribution of property from Dayton Avenue Presbyterian Church. It had just reached the end of its organized life. So that church has closed.

Now people have a lot of personal, emotional investments in a church. This was not an easy decision. It took a lot of conversations. It took time.

But I was impressed and proud of the work that was done by the Dayton Avenue Church members, and by our Presbytery to find a sense of closure and peace.

We celebrated the long, strong history of Dayton Avenue yesterday, and by the way, multiple times, House of Hope was lifted up in appreciation for being a partner in ministry with them. And now the end has come, a peaceful, fitting end. Church conflicts may take time, but it can be an impressive example of Christian peacemaking.

So we may live in a world filled with conflict, but I think the church can be a place where we practice the love of God. Practice, imperfectly, but that is why we practice. To get better. Christians can have the goal of learning how to be Christian peacemakers in our personal lives, in our families in our place of work and our community, and our world. Because we really hope that faith will provide ways to peace. So this is a sermon on a practical theology of conflict whether that be for conflict resolution and conflict management. Some conflicts can be resolved.

But to help us be realistic, there are other conflicts where the best that we can hope for is a sense of managing ourselves in our conflicts to give us a relatively good life.

As soon as they hear the word “conflict,” some people cringe. I want to talk about that cringing. Pay attention to that feeling. Why do we feel that way?

The reality is, life is full of conflict. Let’s be candid: Trying to take a shopping cart down the aisle of Kowalski’s is conflict. We think, “I’m in a hurry, and they run out early, and I WANT those lemon bars.” (or whatever) I want to run down the aisle to get them. It’s just, most of the time, we know the rules.

In the store, traffic moves basically to the right, eye contact is limited, don’t clog the aisles chatting for too long, and have your credit card ready for the cashier. So it ends up being a relatively peaceful, if not stress-free, environment.

Now if we can learn the rules of the road for something as complex as a supermarket, we can learn the rules of the road for relationships. But there is something else going on. David Burns put it, “You feel what you think.” Our thoughts about conflict can send our feelings spiraling.

A lot of time in life, we bring a lot of baggage. Much of it we learned in our childhood: from parents, from teachers, from other kids, from society. Sometimes we think in exaggerated ways, we distort reality.

We have thoughts about ourselves. Are we good enough? If we were we shamed as children, as adults we may feel as if our opinion does not matter, and it makes us passive in the face of conflict.

We have thoughts in relation to adults in positions of power. If you were taught not to talk back to parents, that may be generalized to all sorts of authority figures.

If things escalated in family conflicts, families end up with a “no talk” rule about conflict. Which is to say, don’t talk about it. They worry that little conflicts can easily blow up into World War III, so just don’t talk about it.

If you were taught that men had the final say, or that women were to be seen and not heard, then that can become generalized as adults also, making people passive.

There are all sorts of what we may refer to as Gut theologies: ideas learned long ago, stemming from negative experiences. Experiences learned long ago that result in knee jerk reactions today. Ways of thinking learned in childhood or youth, that become a system in our families and in our churches, negative ways of thinking and behaving in conflict situations.

To develop a healthy, assertive Get in touch with our feelings: healthy process. But then ask, “What belief system is underlying that feeling?” Just because we have feelings does not mean we have to obey them. Developing an assertive theology of conflict means we can relearn, get a new script that is Biblical, theologically, psychologically healthy:

Think of four core ideas for a practical theology of Assertive Christianity:

1. Each of us is created in the image of God.
2. We all are created in the image of God.
3. We all are imperfect, sinful beings,
4. We are all redeemed by Christ.

In short: So we may not be perfect, but we have something worth saying, something worth hearing.

Jesus says: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” So we have to learn to love ourselves as well as our neighbors. Practical theology: We need a script in our head:

As I am a person created in the image of God,
I have the right to an opinion. I have the right to be heard.
And the person with whom I disagree
is also created in the image of God
and they have the right to an opinion.
They have the right to be heard.
Since we are all imperfect sinners,
we need to have a practical humility that truly listens.

Let’s unpack this a little further.

Passive people: turn into a doormat,
and let someone else walk over them.
They deny the image of God in themselves.

Aggressive people: turn into a steam roller,
and roll over others, emotionally.
They deny the image of God in others.

Christian Assertiveness strives to claim
and work to carefully state their opinion,
And work to make sure the other person
is able to state their opinion.

Christian assertiveness seeks
to recognize the image of God in all parties.

It takes courage to be candid, and that is what God's love gives us. We have a gut belief system rooted in fear. Fear that the parental figure won't accept us. Or will punish us. Fear that the friends won't like us. Shame that we are not worthy, not good enough.

Rev. Dick Lundy is one of best preachers I've ever heard. Once in a sermon he talked about his personal growth. He would give a sermon, and afterward, someone would tell him they liked it. But in his head, Lundy said he was thinking, "If you were as theologically sophisticated as I am, you would know how truly inadequate that sermon was." But with Christian assertiveness, he learned to change his thinking and when he received a compliment to receive the comment as a gift, and simply say, "Thank you."

We need to be a community of grace. To receive that grace for ourselves. And to see the grace in other people, imperfect though we may all be. To share the gift of encouragement: to compliment, acknowledge, affirm others. Build trust.

But here is the equally key matter: We need to say it to ourselves. To claim it. Love your neighbor as yourself, love yourself.

Jesus talks about conflict in Matthew 18: He says, "If your brother or sister sins against you, go and tell him or her, between the two of you alone. If he listens to you, you have (re)gained your brother." (or sister) That is a practical ground rule.

There was a guy who lived in the same house I did in college. We were the same age, same class. It seemed as if no matter what I said, he said the opposite. If I said black, he said white. If I said up, he said down. Every time. This guy really irritated me. Finally, I had had enough. And I said to him, "Maybe we should just stay out of each other's way. You and I really disagree on just about everything." And you know what he said? He said, "Oh, I don't agree with that at all."

The two of us went on to talk some more. I don't know how it happened, but somehow, that open, candid conversation changed the dynamic between us. We still had our disagreements, but somehow, in the dynamic of candor and honesty and openness, we became friends.

Jesus says, "If you have something against your brother (or sister) go talk with him or her. Just the two of you. The goal: is not to win: it is to regain the relationship. I think this is an example of Jesus showing us how to set some ground rules for conflict. I think Jesus sets a trajectory for us for behavioral ground rules that shape us as a community of assertive love.

Behavioral Ground Rules -- if you play a game, you have rules. Official teams have official rules. Pick-up games make up their own rules. Churches are more along this line: we figure out what the ground rules are as we go along.

The goal: build relationships. Build trust. Build understanding.

Remember: We don't expect perfection. Sometimes good enough is good enough. See what happens.

I do a short course on ground rules in my pre-marital counseling. They help us take emotional issues, and allow us better self-control.

Rules for constructive communication. These rules are usually simple and to the point.

- A. Talk about one issue at a time. Work it through. (No laundry basket dump of issues.) Then have the other person say what their issue is.
- B. No comments such as "other people say you...."
Either name names or speak for yourself.
It provides no context, it makes the hearer stuck.
Speak for yourself alone. Claim your perspective. (listen to the other)
- C. No labeling. "You are a typical...." Denies personhood.
- D. If there is a complaint, be specific. Don't use language such as, "You always" or "You Never." (scatter shot approach, sends buckshot in every direction.) If there is a problem, be clear, be concise. Helpful.
- E. When you oppose, go on to say what you propose.
- F. Reflect back what each person has heard.
- G. Address issues, not personal motives, intentions or character.
- H. Set boundaries, but stay in relationship.
- I. It is OK to say: I can't have this conflict right now. (boundary)
I will get back to you in 10 minutes or an hour or tomorrow.
Basic idea: clear idea of when you will come back together:

make it clear: you wish to stay in relationship).
(Halverstadt p. 158)

Pretty similar ground rules apply to marriages, to families, to business situations, and to churches. Churches are where we can practice Christian assertiveness. To do as Paul says in Corinthians, remember who we are --we are one body. Christian assertiveness is about building up the body. Building relationships. Not win-lose situations. Even more than win-win. We can all transform – become new.

Christian assertiveness means that Christ guides us not around our conflicts, but through them. With fair ground rules where we treat each other fairly. We treat each other with dignity. We treat each other with love. Or as close as we can get.

And we trust where we have our imperfections, God is present to heal, teach, transform. “As we come to know that we are worthwhile, we learn to stand up for our ideas, feelings, and gifts without standing on anyone else.”

It is a skill that comes with practice, and at its core, it comes from the self-respect of experiencing God’s valuing us, as mirrored by ourselves and others.”

Faith is not about us being perfect, but about a life of practice where we experience again and again, God’s love coming to us all.
Amen.

Benediction: Do not be dismayed over the conflicts of the world. Where there is love, there is hope. And God is preparing you to love extravagantly. The broken world waits in darkness for the light of Christ to shine in you.

Primary Source:
Hugh F. Halverstadt. Managing Church Conflict. Westminster/John Knox Press.