

The Way of Jesus: A Divine Vocation

Matthew 5:9

Introduction – Powder Kegs All Around

It's not often that I willingly publically wade into political issues; especially from the pulpit in a politically diverse church. This week in Israel we have seen the remarkable comeback of a politician. I'm a great admirer of Benjamin Netanyahu. I have read his excellent book on terrorism which he published shortly after 9/11. But in order to get elected, he had to appeal to the ultra-conservatives in his country by backing away from the establishment of a Palestinian State and increasing Jewish settlement in land previously occupied by the Palestinians. There are always two sides to every conflict. While I do understand the constant threat of terror that Israel lives under, I also know that the Palestinians have suffered great injustice. Anger over injustice and fear of terror inflames the passions of war in different nations who feel justified in their wrath. Peace in the Middle East seems even more distant than it did a year ago. Fan the flames of war.

The Middle East isn't the only powder keg in our world. Tensions between Ukraine and Russia have not lessened, but only increased in the last year. I heard a report this week that some Russians citizens are preparing themselves in the event of a nuclear event. (I thought we were done with all that twenty years ago!) In Africa, tribal tensions still thrive and terrorists continue their activities, dampening tourism (round-trip tickets to Kenya are at an all-time low) and killing innocent citizens. Children are still being kidnapped, raped, and forced into military service. The unspeakable horrors of the Islamic State operating in Northern Iraq are well-known and rival even the most wretched atrocities the world has ever known.

We've got our own problems in America. Let's not kid ourselves. While we've come a long way in tempering our racism, white on black prejudice still exists. Most any adult black male can tell you about being harassed by a white policeman simply because he was black. It's just how it is in many places in our country. And when Michael Brown was shot by a white policeman in St. Louis last year, impatience with persistent systemic racism spilled over into demonstrations and riot. Tragically, in the last week, two innocent white policemen were shot because of inflamed passions. As in the Middle East, there are two sides. Michael Brown

physically threatened the police officer, Darren Wilson, who killed the victim in self-defense. Wilson now has no future as a police officer – if he has a future in anything. Both sides of the conflict feel fully justified in their feelings because of the injustice that they have experienced. Fan the flames of war.

I've seen war in families where parents and children won't even talk with each other. Domestic violence is an all too common occurrence. Once the passion of love burned brightly but somehow it turned and now burns hot with hatred. I've seen bitter conflict in churches, and many of you have, too. Each side feels passionately and spiritually justified in their position. Fan the flames of war.

God is not the author of our conflicts.

Jesus powerfully demonstrated and calls those who would follow him to a different path:

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” Matthew 5:9

The Source of our Conflicts and Our Default for Addressing Them

What is the source of conflict between people? James, the half-brother of Jesus, suggests, “Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel” (James 4:1-2). It is our inner passions that drive us. And when they are frustrated, the fire of desire easily turns to the inferno of bitterness, resentment, and hatred. James goes on to confront us when we come to such a place. Our passions are misdirected. We are seeking things for our own benefit and depending on our own cleverness and resources to get them. (Isn't that true?) We are spiritual adulterers, James says. We should be looking to and depending on the Lord. We don't have because we don't ask. We don't receive because our focus is our own lusts and desires. James' words are convicting and hit the mark. Many of our frustrations and angry outbursts occur because we're wanting the wrong things and not depending on God.

But there is another source that often incites conflict between people. I've already mentioned it in my introduction. It may be the most powerful of all factors that inflames people against other people. It is when injustice occurs.

God has designed us with an innate sense of justice. "That's not fair!" is one of the first sentences a child learns to say. (Especially if he has siblings!) No one has to teach a child about fairness – or at least as far as the child is concerned. It is inborn and it is very real. When an injustice is felt, an intense surge rises within the offended person to want to make things right – to make them "fair." While the passion for justice is a reflection of God's image in us, the way we try to secure justice for ourselves is inspired by the Devil.

In order to insure justice for ourselves, we seek revenge. And revenge is always ten times worse than the original offense. I remember many years ago working the city of Norwalk, California as an assistant recreation director. We were working primarily with school-aged kids in a low-income area to provide summer programs to keep the kids occupied and out of trouble. Typical of little kids, one little boy hit another. I watched in horror as my supervisor forced the offending party to stand still while the "victim" took his best shot and slugged him with all his might. "State-sponsored revenge" you might call it. And it was many times worse than the first offense. When we are slighted and we want to seek our own justice, our default desire is to make the offender suffer even more than we have. It's universal and God universally condemns it in his word.

The Nature of Peacemaking

Those who follow Jesus seek another path. Even more, they work to reconcile people who are at odds with each other. That's what a peacemaker does. A peacemaker has God's view - a much larger view of things than the tunnel vision of those who've been offended. The peacemaker sees eternal value in each person. They see not only the offenses and injustice for both sides, but even more importantly, they see the wonderful potential of peace. They are solution-oriented rather than problem-oriented. This kind of peacemaking happens virtually every day in families with small children. Good parents love their children and see eternal value in each one. Inevitably, there will be some sort of slight between the siblings and the fighting will begin.

Mom or Dad will have to intervene and make the injustice right while valuing each child. They are peacemakers.

But peacemaking is often costly. Some peacemakers have even paid the ultimate price. Martin Luther King comes to mind. Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hanged at the age of thirty nine by the German Nazis for his efforts in bringing peace and justice to war-ravaged Europe. Polish labor leader Lech Walesa spent a year in jail seeking to end oppression of the Communist regime in his country. Even non-Christians – acting as people made in the image of God - have been effective peacemakers, paying a high personal cost in return. Gandhi fasted nearly to the point of death and was eventually assassinated for his attempts to bring his Indian countrymen together.

Conflict Among Christians

Sadly, Christians are not immune to interpersonal conflict. One of the worst wars in European history was the 30 Years War of 1618-1648. It was strictly a religious war between Catholics, Lutherans, and Reformed Christians. What a horrible blight on the name of Christ! But war and conflict isn't just some far off historical or geographical phenomenon. Sometimes, it's right here in our homes.

There are husbands and wives, even in our own congregation who rarely speak to each other. And when they do, it is with distrust and bitterness. They are to be commended for resisting the impulse of divorce, especially when children are present. But I wonder how they can spend their lives pickled in the acid of their own bitterness when reconciliation would bring the peace their soul so desperately needs. There are parents and children who long ago stopped having a healthy relationship. I can't understand the stubbornness on both sides that prefers resentful self-justification to reconciliation. These are Christian families. This should break our hearts. I know it breaks God's heart. This should not be true of us.

In most of the letters that Paul wrote to churches and individuals he spent a lot of time trying to make peace between people. His letter to the Romans is a typical example of the advice that he gave to us in making peace:

Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

Romans 12:16-19

Brothers and sisters, conflict not only exists in our Christian homes, it sometimes thrives in our churches, too. I've seen it. I've been a part of it. Many of you have, too. We do not reflect the glory of God and the name of Christ when we are fighting with each other. The sources of our conflicts are the usual: some self-serving interest has been frustrated or we've experienced some sort of injustice. But instead of courageously seeking reconciliation, we go underground and we seek to undermine the other person or group. Like termites destroying the structure unseen behind the walls of a house, conflict thrives in secrecy. We're like clever little children who push up against boundaries. They put their toe on the line but never cross it. Outwardly, we act nice and look godly, but behind the scenes our attitudes and actions are anything but. We take perverse delight in seeing others fail.

The temptation for unresolved conflict is especially high in seasons when there is a lot of change happening. Seasons like right now for us. As most of you know, we are in a great place. We're making decisions and we're taking action. We're changing. And inevitably, some of the changes will not always be agreeable to everyone. Be aware. Be on guard. While we are moving ahead, this is also a time for conflict to easily arise. We're making progress in the kingdom of God against the kingdom of darkness. And the Devil doesn't like it.

I'm not a fan of Stephen King. He's the guy who specializes in writing horror novels, many of which have been made into movies. But *Needful Things*, a novel that he wrote in the early 90's which was made into a movie illustrates Satan's tactics perfectly. The story is set in a small town called, Castle Rock in Maine. It's a typical small town. There is a veneer of niceness covering a lot of interpersonal animosity between the townspeople. A charming older gentlemen by the name of Leland Gaunt moves into town and sets up a small shop selling curious, but

valuable “needful things” – things like a rare baseball card to complete someone’s collection, or sunglasses that Elvis wore, or even a splinter of wood supposedly from Jesus’ cross. Gaunt doesn’t charge much. He just wants the purchaser to pull little “pranks” for him, like soiling the neighbor’s laundry that is set out to dry or slashing the tires of the homeless man who lives in his car. Soon the town is inflamed into war with people killing each other knives and guns and explosives. And all the while, Leland Gaunt watches with a sly grin on his face.



It is a favorite ploy of the Devil. When God’s people fight each other, Satan wins the day.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”

Jesus – the Ultimate Peacemaker

Jesus was the ultimate peacemaker. One week from today, we will celebrate Palm Sunday. On that day, Jesus entered into Jerusalem riding on the hopes of the Jewish people that, as their Messiah, he would finally bring peace and overthrow their Roman oppressors. On the other side of the city, at the same time, the Imperial Army came marching through the gates, beefing up their forces to deal with the heightened tensions that always came during the Passover Feast. Two worlds colliding against each other. Fan the flames of war. The Jewish religious leaders should have been the ones to make peace between the Jewish people who were longing for justice and the Roman Empire, securing their peace through violent and deadly force. But instead, they became pawns of Satan and incited the people to have Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, crucified on a Roman cross. Satan, like Leland Gaunt, tipped his hat and grinned. He was behind the whole deal, in the disillusioned mind of Judas, the jealous hearts of the religious

leaders, and callous violence of the Roman Empire. They did his work for him. They killed God and Satan won the day.

Or so he thought.

In the grandest irony of all, Jesus won by losing. On the cross, he took upon himself all the evil and darkness of the world – that Satan could throw at him – and he disarmed the Devil three days later when he rose from the dead. Satan, the great inciter – the great war-maker – was defeated. Jesus reconciled God to man, man to God, and men with each other he rose from the grave. The Apostle Paul wrote:

...remember that you were at that time separated from Christ...having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. *For he himself is our peace...*

Ephesians 2:12-14a

This, I believe is incredibly compelling. Our mission statement is to *help people find and follow Jesus*. Jesus, himself, is our peace. *Those who truly follow him will not endure hostility between people, but will actively work for reconciliation.*

So how do we do it? Well that, perhaps, is another whole message or even a series.

Peacemaker's Ministries offer four helpful steps in biblical reconciliation:

As people reconciled to God by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we believe that we are called to respond to conflict in a way that is remarkably different from the way the world deals with conflict. We also believe that conflict provides opportunities to glorify God, serve other people, and grow to be like Christ. Therefore, in response to God's love and in reliance on his grace, we commit ourselves to respond to conflict according to the following principles:

Glorify God — Instead of focusing on our own desires or dwelling on what others may do, we will rejoice in the Lord and bring him praise by depending on his forgiveness, wisdom, power,

and love, as we seek to faithfully obey his commands and maintain a loving, merciful, and forgiving attitude.

Get the Log out of Your Eye — Instead of blaming others for a conflict or resisting correction, we will trust in God's mercy and take responsibility for our own contribution to conflicts—confessing our sins to those we have wronged, asking God to help us change any attitudes and habits that lead to conflict, and seeking to repair any harm we have caused.

Gently Restore — Instead of pretending that conflict doesn't exist or talking about others behind their backs, we will overlook minor offenses or we will talk personally and graciously with those whose offenses seem too serious to overlook, seeking to restore them rather than condemn them. When a conflict with a Christian brother or sister cannot be resolved in private, we will ask others in the body of Christ to help us settle the matter in a biblical manner.

Go and be reconciled — Instead of accepting premature compromise or allowing relationships to wither, we will actively pursue genuine peace and reconciliation—forgiving others as God, for Christ's sake, has forgiven us, and seeking just and mutually beneficial solutions to our differences.

By God's grace, we will apply these principles as a matter of stewardship, realizing that conflict is an assignment, not an accident. We will remember that success in God's eyes is not a matter of specific results, but of faithful, dependent obedience. And we will pray that our service as peacemakers will bring praise to our Lord and lead others to know His infinite love. (© Ken Sande, Peacemakers Ministries, 2003)

Whatever your circumstances in the world, at work, in your home, and in your church: be a peacemaker.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”

We are most like Christ when we are making peace.