August 18h , 2019

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Ordinary Time

10:30 am

Holy Disunity

1. A Challenging Text

When I was a little girl my mom would tell me the often heard adage, “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all.” She was also firm about the understanding that you are not to interrupt someone else speaking, because that is rude and impolite. I grew up in a conflict-averse household, and to a great extent, that was a wonderful way to grow up. Yet when I grew up and went to college and was in my early twenties, it was a time of great growth where I had to learn how to jostle with conflict. Outside of my household bubble of like-minded people, I met with people whose views were incredibly different than my own, and sometimes that led to conflict, to fruitful conversations, and to difficult and emotional moments. Yet in those challenging conversations, I think some of my best personal and faithful growth has happened.

I don’t know what kind of upbringing you had, but I do know many people who alike me, grew up in homes where peace was present to the detriment of growth. I believe, that there is a call for Christian people to have a good conflict sometimes. Now, let me be clear, I don’t think the call is that we should be calling each other names, presenting false ‘facts’, or screaming at the top of our lungs. But like the structure of a good debate team, I think we are called to challenge one another in our belief systems with the Scripture, with experience, and with constructive criticism.

II. Jesus and peace

When we read our Gospel lesson today, so many people, including myself, struggle with this Jesus that we see here. It’s almost a Jesus we don’t know. I like the Jesus that tells me about peace, and is kind of hippie, and is off meditating in a garden, and is healing. But this Jesus here is one that is hard to come to grips with, the Jesus that says, “I did not come to bring peace, but I came to bring division.” The Jesus that says families will be torn apart at the seams. It’s a Jesus that makes any peace-loving Christian go into the fetal position and hide with discomfort.

Many theories have come out around this passage and theologians for centuries have ironically been divided about how to interpret this text. Some folks claim that it is a just-war theory and some claim that it goes back to Greek culture of symbolic perceptions of heart vs. head. I am not going to pretend that I have the right theological perspective, but the one I offer here today I faithfully believe brings us to a better understanding of how to live out our faith.

III. Christianity calls us to Conflict

My theological perspective is that Jesus in this passage is telling us that living out a life of true faith and diligent discipleship will lead us to conflict. In fact, living this faith might separate us from those we are in close relationship with, and while that is hard and difficult and even trauma-bearing, we are still called to live out this faith.

This faith also leads you and me to difficult conversations, conversations that can be heart-wrenching. Yet, we need to hear one another’s stories, we need to respond with our own, and we need to acknowledge that sometimes we will grow closer from conflict and sometimes we will need to be divided to live our faith.

There is also a disclaimer though, that I think is important to mention here: you and I are human – we can only handle so much conflict at one time. As humans, we have a certain amount of spoons we can use everyday. This spoon theory was written in 2003 by Christine Miserandino, where she explains that every person has a certain amount of spoons that they wake up with every morning, and the spoons are a metaphor for energy. At some point, you run out of spoons or energy, and the only way to regain spoons is through rest. Depending on our physical and emotional health, some folks have more spoons than others and there is a plenty of grace for taking a time out when you just don’t have any more energy to give.

This theory is like other theories – like when you are on a plane, you put on your oxygen mask first and then help others – because it is only when you are oxygenated that you can help others.

All of this spoon theory is to say – use your energy wisely in living out the life of faith. There will be days in which you can’t engage in this life altering, faith building, soul gripping work of conflict and engagement – you’re out of spoons. And you know what? That’s OK. God isn’t calling you to conflict all the time – there is space for rest and space for care.

IV. When you have the spoons

But when you have the spoons, when you have the energy to give, you might find that the Jesus of conflict and the Jesus of peace are one in the same, for in working out conflict, we can find a deeper peace. We can find a deeper knowledge of the people we are called to be by our loving God.

When I started this sermon, I told you about the conflict-averse household I grew up in, and how I had to engage in new ways in my 20s. In that growth, I distinctly remembering challenging all sorts of ethical questions, here’s just a few – the pro-life and pro-choice movements, LGBT issues, just-war theories, political debates, etc.

I distinctly remember my Freshman year of college where my roommate and I, in a tiny room, split up space on our dorm room door in the hallway. She had one half with republican posters and I had my true blue democratic donkey on the other half. And we learned that in our difference of belief, we could still be the best of friends. Now, just to say, many years later, she has become a raging blue democrat and we still laugh about that door and the debates years later.

Through conversations where my blood pressure rose and my anxiety grew, I also grew as a person and as a faithful individual who is seeking God. Over the years, I’ve had the learn how to have some of these conversations – I’ve learned to do my research before I speak, I’ve learned that I’m better off listening before jumping in, and I’ve learned that if we all had the same belief system, this world would be a pretty boring place.

I’ve also learned the hard truth that in order for me to live as an LGBT pastor, has meant that I have lost friendships. While some debates go well, Jesus is absolutely right – there is a loss and a sacrifice the people of God have to accept as we live our lives of faith. Not everyone is going to accept you, or as another one of my mom quotes goes, “You can’t please everyone.” Sometimes, you’ll walk away from a conflict hand in hand, and sometimes you’ll walk away from conflict knowing that in order to be the person you are called to be, you’ll need to say goodbye.

My challenge is – when you have enough spoons and you are rested, step into those conversations with the knowledge that God is there. It won’t be easy, in fact, God promises that it won’t – but sometimes peace only comes through division. So, in faithfulness to God and commitment to growth, I encourage you to have constructive conversations and conflicts so that the Spirit may work and flourish within you and through you. Amen.