

Proper 9

The Lord speaks to us today about conflict and about the particular conflict of knowing better than others.

Of *thinking* we know better than others. Have you had one of those lately?

They arise all around me, I sometimes think.

One priest will tell another that there is only one proper, correct way to do our work, that it is anathema to sing this, do that, or wear that on some certain day.

People raising children in extended family fall into this.

Can you believe they let their kids watch the Sponge Bob Square Pants weekend marathon?

That they let them eat cotton candy and drink Coca-Cola?

Or that they are so rigid and demanding and pretend their children can only eat organic food?

Families get together and go to the lake and beach this time of year and such things are whispered, if not shouted, by young uncles and aunts who've not finished their childhood struggles with each other,

by grandparents who wish their adult children would step up to the parenting plate as they've set it.

I trust that's not just my family!

Of course, the Bible would remind us of that.

Cain and Abel, Isaac and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, Saducees and Pharisees; our conflicts in family, faith, and country are ancient.

When we claim the authority of knowledge, that there is a right way (or a better way than others), we invite conflict,

especially if we claim that right or better way not just for ourselves, but as right or better for others as well.

This is one of the trickier moments in human life and in Christian discipleship.

How do we name and claim what we believe to be true and optimal, without becoming judgmental jerks whom others avoid?

And on the other hand, how do we remain in relationship, in communion with others without surrendering hard-won convictions,

without abandoning the search for a life of meaning and holiness?

How do we engage without dissolving into the general stream?

It is a question for every person and a question for Christians living in the world.

One of the most helpful things the Lord Jesus said about such things is his observation about the critical reception both he and John the Baptist received.

John was abstinent in all things, fasting and taking only water, no wine, and thus missing many parties (or ruining them with his gaunt presence!)

and so the respectable religious people said he had a demon.

Jesus, on the other hand, ate with many and had wine with them,

and the same critics called him a glutton and drunkard and said he went out too much.

(There is a saying I wouldn't use from the pulpit that speaks to such situations!)

What is helpful here is the Lord's recognition that no strategy for relationship or engagement will work out perfectly;
if we live with conviction, avoiding all conflict is impossible.
Parents cannot surrender to their children's every wish;
the Christian cannot be guided by the dictates of our culture.
Nor can parents strong arm their children forever;
and the Christian church or individual that withdraws behind closed doors can have no mission.
To live faithfully and fully is to engage and relate and to bear the inevitable trouble that comes with that.

So what makes it better?

Is there wisdom in the Word of God today for engaging with each other and with the world in ways that are more life-giving?

Surely!

The virtues we have seen in God, as God has shown himself/godslef to us across salvation history are the same virtues we seek in our living with others.

What did we sing of in the Psalm?

A God gracious, a God compassionate; a God slow to anger and of great kindness.

A God not just loving, we sang, but loving to everyone, and compassionate to all his works.

That's amazing!

A God merciful, who upholds those who fall and lifts up those bowed down.

These are words worth putting on a post-it note and sticking to your bathroom mirror, to get you going in the morning.

Worth putting on an index card and sticking in your Bible.

Gracious, compassionate, slow to anger, great in kindness, loving to everyone, merciful.

This is the God in whose image you are made;

you can hope, in God's grace, in the power of the Spirit, to manifest such gifts.

These divine qualities are meant for human life as well.

Even people in deep disagreement can live in such love in the Spirit.

The Lord said "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

The Lord means that his ways are meant for us, that we are to live in him and live as he lived.

He invites us to a gentle manner and to lowliness of heart,

which makes our way through life seem or feel easier and lighter, even if the way is hard.

He modeled such a way as he walked toward the Cross,

calling Peter to sheathe the sword,

not debating his accusers,

accepting the injustice of his condemnation.

His willing death on the Cross shows his ultimate and perfect gentleness and lowliness of heart, for he defeated the enemies of sin and death by willing submission,

the victory which the Father underscored with the wonder of the Resurrection,
changing the rules forever.

Jesus won the great battle of salvation by gentle submission and changed the universe.

Such a way is meant for us as well.

It will help you get along with your siblings as you care for aging parents,

with your neighbor as we seek to better our community,

with fellow citizens as we seek national reconciliation,

and with fellow members of the Body of Christ as we seek to be in mission together.

Accepting the yoke of Jesus is the key to the life well lived and to the eternal life we are promised.

We have only so much time friends, and sometimes it grows short unexpectedly.

We don't have enough time to live in hate and haste.

As followers of Jesus, we can be true to him and his will and still love the whole world for which
he died.

His yoke is light and lightens our way, that we might live toward the Kingdom of God.