

When Less is More: Less Anxiety – Less Dissention More Harmony

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1 Corinthians 12:12-31

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear would say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect, whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then deeds of power, then gifts of healing, forms of assistance, forms of leadership, various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work powerful deeds? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues?

Do all interpret? But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way. 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 (NRSV).

Let's pray together. Join me in prayer: O God, open us up today. Open our eyes that we might see and our ears that we might hear, and open our hearts that we might feel. Then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.

My wife and I sometimes have disagreements. I know you find that hard to believe, but it's true. In our home, we sometimes have disagreements, most of them are small. I leave the gate open, and the dogs get out – that happens a lot. Or maybe I slosh coffee places. She likes the thermostat at 73, and I like it at 76. So, we compromise, and we set it at 73.

But regardless of what kind of disagreements we have, if I go to work and we have not resolved that in some way, I'm sick all day long. It feels like my right arm's been torn off or something. I just can't concentrate or think. I don't know if therapists think that's healthy or not, but it's the way it is with me. And I think for a lot of us, conflict just eats away at us. It just eats at us.

We've been talking about those things that sort of take over our hearts. We talked about desires, how desires for more, bigger and better - we get taken away with that. We talked about how we worry so much about what others think about us, about our image. Last week, we talked about anxiety, and how it sort of takes us over. And how if we can get rid of those, push those out of our hearts, and have less of those, then we can fill them with things that give us abundant life.

Today I want to talk about conflict. About dissension. And how it hurts us. I'm not going to spend a lot of time on it, but it's so well documented. The impact of people who grow up and live with conflict, whether it's in a family, or in a country. People who grow up in war zones. Their health is not as good. Kids who grow up in conflict don't perform as well as they get older. For all of us, being in conflict takes a toll on our mental and physical health.

What I want us to talk about today is how we, as followers of Jesus, deal with that.

First, why do we fight? Why do we fight with each other? We're going to look at this Scripture and see what we can learn, but it seems obvious. In verse 14: "Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many." Or in verse 19: "...If all were a single

member where would the body be? (1 Corinthians 12:14,19). Or in verse 29: "Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Or teachers? Do all work powerful deeds? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret?" We fight because we're all so different. We grew up in different situations, we have different passions, and we have different experiences. We have different perspectives on the world and different sets of gifts and graces. It's supposed to be that way. That's how we were made. All of us were made differently, and isn't that good? What would life be like if, as the Scripture says, everything was an eye, where would the hearing be? What would it be like if, in the words of Garrison Keeler: "All the women were strong, all the men were good looking, and all the children were above average?" It would be a boring world. We're made to be different.

I've been reading a book by Doris Goodwin called *Team of Rivals, the Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*. After his election, Lincoln added to his cabinet the three people who campaigned the hardest against him. Who campaigned for the Republican nomination. And those three were vicious in their attacks. The things that they said about him were just horrible. But he said, "I need you on my cabinet." Then he added three former Democrats to his cabinet. He said, "Here's why. Because at this point in our country, we need one another. I need you to help me put this back together." And they talk about his genius, not his personality, which wasn't all that great, but his character was what held together this team of rivals that was designed to try and help the country move forward.

If you're in business or in any organization... I had a mentor who said, "Don't ever surround yourself with people who want to drink your bathwater. "You want to have people who will share with you their views of other thoughts, other perspectives." We need one another. That's what the Scripture is telling us here. He says, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,' nor the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'" (1 Cor. 12:21). We need all the voices; we need tall people and short people. We need young, middle-aged, and old people. We need people of all races. We need people of all perspectives. We need conservatives and progressives and libertarians and Green Parties. We need tattooed people and shiny-skinned people. We need people with hair and people who are bald. We need all sorts of people. You name it, and we needed them. Because all the voices matter. We need one another.

So, into this weird world, we hear Paul write these words: "God has so arranged the body, giving greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body." (1 Cor. 12:24). Come on! Seriously? No dissension? You take all those different kinds of people and put them together. In a church or a country or in a city, or in a family and expect there to be no dissension?

Here's where I think translations matter. This is the New Revised Standard Version, and it's the version we use most of the time. But the translator misses the boat on this one. The word that's translated here as *dissension* is the Greek word *schisma*, and we get the word *schism* from that. It means literally *to tear*. That's why the New International Version and, frankly, most versions translate it as "Let there be no divisions among you." "Or no tears." Some of them are more literal. That there can be stretching and pulling and tensions and struggles, but don't ever let it tear. It's got to hold together. We've got to keep the pieces there together.

There's going to be dissension, but don't let it tear the fabric.

I want to take a brief aside for a moment because here's what is interesting. This passage is aimed at the Body of Christ. So how do we deal together as Christians? How we live together as followers of Jesus. Regardless of denomination - how we live together. But it has applications beyond that. Because we as Christians are called to live in the world by the same principles we live together. It's not like we'd say, "Oh, here's how we treat one another - oh, get out there, and you can be different!" That's not what it says?

Do you know what the shortest parable in the Bible is? It goes this way, and it's only one verse long. "He told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.'" (Matthew 13:33). Meaning that those of us who are followers of Jesus are to be like yeast in the world. We are to transform it, to change it. So that all of it functions like the Kingdom of God. So that, as we said in the prayer a few minutes ago, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We can't check our faith at the door and say, "When I get out there, man, it's a dog-eat-dog world! So, I have to act different out there." We can't say to ourselves, "You know, I tried to be nice, and nice didn't work. I tried love and kindness, and love and kindness didn't work. So we have to hit back!"

That perspective is so anathema to the Christian faith. We live by the principles of the Kingdom as counterculture as those are. As naive as they might seem. And we live by those in the world around us. And as we are faithful to those then God does God's work and transforms the world. That's the way it's supposed to work.

We need to function that way as we go out of here. That's why Paul writes this to the Thessalonians: "See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all. Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." (1 Thessalonians 5:15-18).

What we're looking for is not unanimity here. We're looking for harmony. We're not looking to sing in unison, but we're looking to sing our parts. But also, to recognize that we are part of something bigger. We're called on to say, "This is what I believe." Because that's your part, we have people in the Christian faith who are so committed to personal morality, to living chaste and pure lives, and there are others who are so committed and believe so strongly in social justice. Those are your parts to sing. That's what you've been called to proclaim and proclaim it. But do it in a way that recognizes that you're part of something bigger. And that all the voices matter.

So, what do we do with this conflict? What do we do with it inside us? What do we do when our neighbor's dog won't quit barking? What do we do when we deal with our ex-spouse? What do we do when a colleague at work is an obstructionist and is such a real pain? What do we do with our brother-in-law who rants and raves at the Thanksgiving table about his politics? What do we do?

Well, there are a lot of ways to deal with conflict, and I can't give an exhaustive summary here. But I want to lift up three of them. The first is that the dissention is good, and so we have to lean into it to see what growth, what change it can bring in us.

I had a wonderful conversation this week with Jim Roman and Sid Davis, our musicians here, about dissonance. Dissonance in music is when the notes don't sound good together. They kind of make you wince when you hear them. Jim said, "Dissonance is important because it moves the music forward." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "It moves the music forward because it demands resolution. You can't finish there. Music goes to dissonance, and then it resolves."

Someone sent me a text between services that said dissonance may move the music forward, but it will also clear out the sanctuary for the next service. I thought that was pretty good.

The idea being is going to help you move to the next thing. So, when we deal with conflict in whatever situation... in your family, in the church, or whatever situation, you lean into that. Because you recognize that it allows you to come to a place on the other side of it. I don't know how many families go through really hard times, and the old saying is, "Don't ever waste a good crisis." That crisis that you come to needs to move you to a place where you deal with each other in a different way. Where you learn something, and you learn how to function together.

We want to lean into whatever those challenges we have are so that we can get to a resolution. That we can say, "What is it that we need to do differently to function better together?" That's the first thing about resolving.

The second thing is that we have to identify the thing that does bind us together. So, the Scripture that we read today says, "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." (1 Corinthians 12:13).

This idea that there's something that binds us together. In music, it's the melody. So, you have people singing harmony, but all those harmonies are to support a melody that moves forward. The one thing that everything is designed to hold to. In the church, we talk about the one Spirit that binds us together. We're all followers of Jesus Christ. We all want to proclaim the name of Jesus as we move forward. And we may differ about things, but that's what binds us together as we continue to do our work together.

But the question is - what about in the world? Where we're not all followers of Jesus? Where we're not all bound together by the one Holy Spirit. What binds us together there? Well, I would suggest to you that it's our common humanity. We are all children of God. We all share this planet. We all cry. We all have dreams. And fears. We all have loves. All of those things are what make us human beings.

Many years ago, here at St. Luke's, our church staff read a book called *The Anatomy of Peace: Resolving the Heart of Conflict*. It's written by the Arbinger Institute, which is an organization that works with organizations partly about conflict but partly about change and leadership and things like that. This book tells the story of two men, one is a

Jew, and one is an Arab, and both of their parents were killed in the war between Egypt and Israel years ago by the other side. But they come together and begin a wilderness program to treat troubled young people. They teach them these principles of the anatomy of peace. And they work with their families also. They talk about how you live with others, about the differences between a heart of war and a heart of peace. What they call your "way of being." This was helpful to me. Here's what they said, "A heart of peace sees others as people, with hopes, needs, cares, and fears as real to me as my own." So not just real to them but real to me if I have a heart of peace. It goes on: "A heart of war sees others as objects, obstacles..." Something in the way of getting what I want or what I want to accomplish. Continuing: "... vehicles..." who will help me get what I want to accomplish... "or irrelevancies." Doesn't matter; they can just go away.

And what happens is as we get sort of fired up about things, we tend to move from seeing people with our heart of peace, seeing them as people, and start seeing them as objects to either help or hurt us. We classify them into those categories, "Are you on my team or not?" That's the move that really begins to keep us from that experience of moving through the conflict in a positive way.

I was telling you about that *Team of Rivals* book, and the author spends a good deal of time talking about Lincoln's depression. He carried what she called "melancholy" around all the time. Here's what she writes about it: "Lincoln had internalized the pain of those around him - the wounded soldiers, the captured prisoners, the defeated Southerners. Little wonder that he was overwhelmed at times by a profound sadness that even his own resilient temperament could not dispel." - Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Team of Rivals: the Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*.

He cared about even his enemies. That was part of what allowed him to lead. That is when we choose to really care about others and not see them as obstacles. But to see them as people. That's the thread that binds us together as humans.

Here's the last thing. We move through conflict through the power of love. That sounds syrupy, I know, but it's funny. If you read Scripture, it's kind of prominent. It says, "Another command I give you, that you love another." Paul says, "Speak the truth in love." Here he says, "...that there may be no dissension within the body... No division, no schisms.... but the members may have the same care for one another." (1 Corinthians 12:25). And then, as he finishes this passage of 1 Corinthians 12, he says, "And I will

show you a more excellent way..." Do you know what comes after I Corinthians 12? It's 1 Corinthians 13 where we hear the familiar words, "If I speak with the tongues of men and angels but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal."

John Wesley, in his sermon called "Catholic Spirit," says this: "Though we cannot think alike, may we not love alike? May we not be of one heart, though we are not of one opinion? Without all doubt, we may. Herein all the children of God may unite, notwithstanding the smaller differences." (John Wesley, *Catholic Spirit*).

The power of love.

Friends, I know we live in a world of conflict. You have conflict and dissension in your life, maybe in your family or in your workplace. But as we move into that place, we have to move into it living by the principles of the Kingdom of God. Not by the principles of the world where the winners win, and the losers lose. But where the last are first, and the first are last. "For those who lose their lives will gain it." And we may not win, we may not fight till we win, but maybe we'll love till we lose. Even if losing means the cross.

Let's pray together: *Gracious God, we confess that conflict is hard for us. It eats us up. And we want so much to stand up for what we believe, and we ask that you give us the voice of courage to stand up for what we believe is right. And to speak the truth but to speak that truth in love. And to be willing to open ourselves up to grow and to change, and to look for that one thing that binds us together with other human beings. And to practice what you showed us on the cross - the power of love. To change the world, we pray in the name of Christ. Amen.*