

“Fear Not: Courageous Conversations”
Matthew 18:15-20

Rev. Nadia Bolz-Weber is a very well-known Lutheran pastor and thus her church, House for All Sinners and Saints in Colorado, gets a lot of visitors and then new members. Because of celebrity status, people join her church hoping and longing for that church to be their spiritual community and home. They expect that church to be the ideal Christian community. But Nadia has developed a little talk she gives to those seekers. She tells them, “Look, we’re not perfect. Churches are made of human beings. Someday, we will disappoint you or hurt you. Someday, I will disappoint you or hurt you. It’s a matter of when, not if. The church, this church, WILL let you down. Please decide, right now, right up front, that you’ll stick around when that happens, and let God’s grace do its work in the cracks left by the brokenness of human communities.”

Conflict, disagreement, and struggle are part of life and any human community. Conflict and disagreement touch us all in our families, groups of friends, churches, organizations, communities, and countries. Yet, one of our greatest fears is dealing with conflict. We learn unhealthy ways to deal with conflict such as avoidance, gossip, violence, separation, and personal attacks.

This fear of conflict is almost like a phobia for most of us. Imagine you are in a meeting or at a gathering and someone starts disagreeing with someone else loudly or meanly. How do you react? What about if someone starts attacking you for something that you said or did? What about when someone comes to you complaining about how someone else has hurt them or has hurt an organization you care about? There are many other scenarios like these when we find ourselves uncomfortable and when our fears drive us into uncaring and unloving responses.

Jesus knew the importance of teaching his community about responding with love in times of conflict to heal and to transform the way people deal with each other. Even his inner circle of friends had disagreements among them. And so Jesus gave instructions on how to deal with conflict through a step by step process. Jesus took conflict seriously and saw in it a potential for greater healing. First, you go and speak to the person directly. This is one of the hardest steps because it takes courage and vulnerability. We would have to own our own feelings without attacking or degrading the other person. It is much easier to complain, avoid, or gossip about the person who hurt us. The second step is taking another person with us not to attack the person or gang up on them, but to allow for a more neutral person to enter the scene. The third step is to have a gathering of the community to speak about the conflict. This is another hard step because people tend to take sides instead of creating soulful spaces where people can be honest and loving at the same time, where the norms provide respect and dignity for all.

One piece that is often misunderstood is the end of the process that Jesus provides is not getting rid of the offending party if they don’t reform their behavior. When Jesus says that they are to be for us like a Gentile or a tax collector, we have to remember that Jesus treated those two groups very well. He did not hate them. Instead he included them every chance he got. What I believe this piece helps us see is that if the person we have a conflict with, is not willing to work through the conflict to transform their behavior, then more work is needed

for building bridges with them. Just like the disciples had to work on building bridges to Gentiles and tax collectors, when a person remains stuck in their hate, anger, or abusive behavior, our work with them requires more bridge building.

Verse 20 of our scripture for today from Matthew 18 in which Jesus says, “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them” is often taken out of context and used to think of people being gathered in the name of Christ. But the actual context of that chapter was conflict. Jesus was saying that he is with us in the midst of conflict to bring us healing and wholeness. Our work is to trust in his guidance and in his example.

As we conclude this sermon series on fear and the invitation of God to not fear, I believe that creating soulful spaces and norms could bring us a lot of healing. We have an opportunity today to continue to practice this creativity of spirit with each other so that when we go to our other social circles, we are equipped to bring this energy of love in very practical ways.

Think of the recent stories from our community where people are stealing election yard signs because they disagree with their neighbors politically. What if building a bridge and facing our fears were values these neighbors in the same community practiced together. Here is a story of such an interaction. This comes from Eric Law’s book *Fear Not*. “Before the 2016 election, a friend of mine had noticed a campaign sign in his next-door neighbor’s front yard supporting the other candidate. He did not know this neighbor well except for the safe ‘good morning’ and ‘nice weather’ talks. He speculated that she was a nice person. But like most of us, he had avoided any kind of political conversation with her during this time. After the election, he realized that he did not know anyone who had voted differently than himself, and decided to do something about this, beginning with getting to know his neighbor. The next morning after saying ‘good morning,’ he proposed to his neighbor that they should have tea or coffee, and that he wanted to understand her perspective. To his surprise, she said yes.” Eric Law offers helpful guidelines on how to set up norms that create space of grace. In fact, our session last January was considering training all of our leaders on these principles so that we can be better equipped to carry out the mission of Christ with grace and joy. The guidelines are simple and yet very powerful. Here are Eric Law’s Respectful Communication Guidelines:

- R - take Responsibility for what you say and feel without blaming others
- E - use Empathetic listening
- S - be Sensitive to differences in communication/cultural styles
- P - Ponder what you hear and feel before you speak
- E - Examine your own assumptions and perceptions
- C - keep Confidentiality
- T - Tolerate ambiguity because we are not here to debate. There are no winners or losers.

What if we agreed on such norms in our families and other circles? It does not mean that conflict wouldn’t happen. Instead, we would be equipped to handle it in the way of Christ. And this takes commitment and practice. By following the guidance of Christ and living by his norms, we can be the healing hands and feet of Christ knowing that his Spirit is always with us remembering his words, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.” Amen.