

“Why We Gather: Good Controversy”
John 8:1-11

Two Sundays ago, I indulged Mike by watching a part of the football game between the Buccaneers and the Patriots. It was a big game since Tom Brady was going back to Massachusetts to play against the team he led to Super Bowl victory many times. There was a lot of hype about the game which was billed as “The Return” game for Quarterback Tom Brady going back to play against the team of his coach Bill Belichick. It was very entertaining to watch all the hype about the game. Here is a short video that I found to be really funny: <https://youtu.be/3AhkTH9i8qI>

Competition and conflict make for good entertainment. But conflict in real life is seldom something we enjoy. In fact, one of the things we learn early on in childhood is to stay out of trouble and conflict. The only problem is that life is rarely a smooth line where all of us agree on everything and see things the same way. The diversity of life is what makes it wonderful and challenging at the same time. An important part of why we gather as a community is to learn to see things from different perspectives, especially when it comes to justice issues.

We can learn from the example of Jesus of how he dealt with conflict in his community. One of the common misunderstandings of Jesus is that he was always nice and never got into conflict with others. We often portray Jesus as meek and mild as if engaging in human conflicts would have tainted him. Yet, by considering how Jesus didn't shy away from conflict but transformed it into an opportunity for greater justice, we can learn the value of engaging our communities in healthy dialogue. Our Bible story provides us with a powerful example about the power of gathering and engaging others with whom we disagree.

One of the difficult things to get in this story is figuring out what Jesus was writing on the ground. That seems like an odd thing to do. What we have to remember is that Jesus was in Jerusalem, like thousands of other pilgrims, for the last feast of the year. This was the feast of the Tabernacles. Here is a brief video about this festival: <https://youtu.be/3RVwKvQU8Ps>. This is the time when the people of ancient Israel remember their sojourn in the wilderness for 40 years after escaping slavery in Egypt. This is mentioned in Exodus 23 and Leviticus 23. It is a festival that lasted eight days where people would stay in temporary shelters to remember their sojourn and to remember how God cared for them. One element of that experience was the time when God provided water out of the rock for the people of Israel (Exodus 15). Just like God provided them manna, God also provided water. That is why water was a very important symbol in that festival. Water became the symbol of God's providence and care for the people of Israel in a time of need and oppression. As part of the celebration, the people would gather in the temple and wave green branches. Then the high priest would make his way down from the temple through the crowds to get water out of the pool of Siloam and bring it back to the temple in a gold pitcher.

The religious leaders would teach their people the stories of faith. One of the passages that was used as part of that tradition was from Jeremiah 17:13, "O hope of Israel! O Lord! All who forsake you shall be put to shame; those who turn away from you will be written in the dust, for they have forsaken the fountain of living water, the Lord."

What does Jesus do when he is being set up with the question about killing the woman who got caught in adultery? He writes in the dust! You can see what Jesus was doing. He was exposing the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. For one thing, they only brought in the woman. Where was the man? Also, in the chapter just before, the religious leaders wanted Jesus arrested because he was claiming to be the living water of God. He was challenging their authority and corruption. They were the ones who turned away from God and thus had no business condemning someone else for turning away from God.

We can learn so much from Jesus' example of not shying away from conflict for the sake of justice. He did it with kindness and love. He stayed focused on God's will and the bigger issue at hand instead of getting stuck in defending his ego. He knew that it was risky to stand up for justice, but his focus on the will of God, helped him find the courage and grace to step in our human conflicts.

Conflict and disagreements are inevitable in our human gatherings and relationships. The invitation is to find ways to navigate them with grace and for the sake of justice in the world. One of the things which Priya Parker encourages for good and meaningful gatherings is to create "good controversy." Here is her explanation of how this might work: <https://youtu.be/ppfONdsOkWI>. She says, "The next step of creating more meaningful everyday gatherings is to cause good controversy. You may have learned, as I did, never to talk about sex, politics or religion at the dinner table. It's a good rule in that it preserves harmony, or that's its intention. But it strips away a core ingredient of meaning, which is heat, burning relevance. The best gatherings learn to cultivate good controversy by creating the conditions for it, because human connection is as threatened by unhealthy peace as by unhealthy conflict. I was once working with an architecture firm, and they were at a crossroads. They had to figure out whether they wanted to continue to be an architecture firm and focus on the construction of buildings or pivot and become the hot new thing, a design firm, focusing on beyond the construction of spaces. And there was real disagreement in the room, but you wouldn't know, because no one was actually speaking up publicly. And so we hosted good controversy. After a lunch break, all the architects came back, and we hosted a cage match. They walked in, we took one architect, put him in one corner to represent architecture, the other one to represent design. We threw white towels around their necks, stolen from the bathroom -- sorry -- played Rocky music on an iPad, got each a Don King-like manager to rev them up and prepare them with counterarguments, and then basically made them each argue the best possible argument of each future vision. The norm of politeness was blocking their progress. And we then had everybody else physically choose a side in front of their colleagues. And because they were able to actually show where they stood, they broke an impasse. Architecture won.

So that's work. What about a hypothetical tense Thanksgiving dinner?...So first, ask the purpose. What does this family need this year? If cultivating good heat is part of it, then try for a night banning opinions and asking for stories instead. Choose a theme related to the underlying conflict. But instead of opinions, ask everybody to share a story from their life and experience that nobody around the table has ever heard, to difference or to belonging or to a time I changed my mind, giving people a way in to each other without burning the house down."

We need each other, especially our differing struggles and stories. Yet, we often avoid any substantive discussions for fear of controversy. Sometimes even in church, we avoid the important issues we are all wrestling with as to not offend anyone or seem political and yet being the hands and feet of Christ in the world requires that we struggle with the tough issues of our day. The invitation is to practice "good controversy" where we do it nonviolently and where we commit to staying in relationship.

Where do you struggle with conflict and disagreements in community (small or large)?
We will end with a variation on the prayer of St. Francis for peace:

Lord, make us instruments of your Peace. In a world all too prone to violence and revenge,
We commit ourselves to the Gospel Values of Mercy, Justice, Compassion, and Love;
We will seek daily to promote forgiveness and healing in our hearts, our families, and our world.

Where there is hatred, let us sow Love; Where there is injury, let us cultivate Peace. Fear and distance prevent people from recognizing all as sisters and brothers; tensions lead to violence and mistrust; We will strive to honor the dignity that God places in each and every human person.

Grant that we may not seek to be understood as to understand; To be loved as to Love. Our failure to understand the other can create exclusion in all its negative forms: racism, marginalization of those who are poor, sick, the immigrant; it can also create situations of domination, occupation, oppression and war. We pledge to see the way of solidarity, to create hearts, homes, and communities where all people will experience inclusion, hospitality, and understanding. For it is in giving that we receive, in pardoning that we are pardoned and in dying that we are born to Eternal Life. Amen.