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Acts 15:36-41

When You Cannot Reconcile

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It was the kind of sermon people talk about over Sunday dinner. Pastor Gilmore and his wife were guests in the home of one of the deacons that afternoon. As the debate about the sermon continued on after the meal, the pastor silently composed a poem that he quietly gave to his wife. She smiled as she read the words:

He leadeth me, O blessed thought!
O words with heav'nly comfort fraught!
Whate'er I do, where'er I be,
Still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me.

Sometimes mid scenes of deepest gloom,
Sometimes where Eden's bowers bloom,
By waters calm, o'er troubled sea,
Still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me.

That poem eventually became a hymn. Like many of you, I learned the hymn as a child, and it has guided me through the conflicts of my life. Somehow, I tell myself, God is using even this troubled sea to lead me, and those with whom I am in conflict. And that is God's mission.

Paul and Barnabas, and the church in Antioch, all knew that the will of God would ultimately prevail. That is why they were free to disagree and get back to serving the mission of their common church. Some assume this concept of God's will is deterministic, as if it prescribes a particular position on all issues. Just the opposite is true. Since we believe God's will ultimately prevails, we are free to develop humbly the most thoughtful position we can in a debate without having to be certain about the mind of God. And since we believe God's will ultimately prevails, we are free from having to prevail ourselves when our position conflicts with the beliefs of other thoughtful people. Best of all, we are free to commend those with whom we disagree to the grace of God, and return to our mission of knowing and enjoying this God who leads us all to a future far beyond the positions we are defending.

Life is short. So very short. Do you really want to spend it in devotion to your conflicts? You were called to something much higher. Amen.

I don't know if anybody really enjoys conflict, but we all get a lot of it. Whether it is just two people trying to maintain a relationship or the nations of the world arguing about the production of weapons of mass destruction, conflicts seem inevitable.

The Bible doesn't claim that Christians should avoid conflicts, and it doesn't even tell us much about how to resolve them. What it does tell us is how to live with conflict. That brings us to our text today.

Paul and Barnabas had already completed their first missionary trip to the cities of Galatia where they faced considerable conflict in getting their message out. When things didn't go so well in one town, they shook the dust of that city from their feet and moved on to the next — where they met more conflict. In one of the towns Paul was even stoned and left for dead. But in spite of the hardships, the apostles still established several churches before eventually returning home to Antioch, a bit battered and bruised. Meanwhile, a conflict developed back in the mother church of Jerusalem over whether or not Paul and Barnabas' Gentile converts had to be circumcised. So they went to Jerusalem where they got into quite an argument with the church hierarchy.

After all of that conflict, Paul looked at Barnabas and said, "Let's do it again. Let's hit the road and tell more people about the love of God in Jesus Christ." Barnabas said, "Great, and let's bring my young cousin, John Mark." But Mark had bailed out on the first missionary journey and Paul refused to give him a second chance. Barnabas insisted that they do. "The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed to Cyprus. But Paul chose Silas and set out." (15:39)

Now this is quite striking. Two missionaries who had been through so much together and survived so much conflict with others, who have been thrown out of most of the cities in Galatia and stood side by side during their ecclesiastical trial in Jerusalem, can't agree with each other about as small an issue as bringing Mark along on the next trip. So they bust up the team, find new partners, and go their separate ways.

In preparing for this sermon, I read the opinions of a lot of Biblical commentators who claimed this was a great tragedy. Even John Calvin shakes his

head at the apostles' failing here. But the text says nothing about this irreconcilable conflict being a sin or even a failure. What the text does say is that the believers commended the apostles to the grace of the Lord, and then let both missionary teams go on with the urgent mission of proclaiming Jesus.

The early church was quite accustomed to conflict. They knew about conflict with the world around them and conflict with each other. For them, this spat between Paul and Barnabas was no big deal. The big deal was fulfilling their mission of talking about Jesus. In fact, the church viewed the conflict as a way to double their missionary force. Paul chose Silas as his new partner and went back to Galatia, while Barnabas got to have Mark as his partner and they went to Cyprus.

This brings us to the most important insight this text gives us in handling irreconcilable conflicts — you have to keep clear about your mission. The mission is not that you prevail in the conflict, and neither is it that we all just get along. The mission, the purpose of your life, is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever. And that means that, if you find that all of your energy and joy is being sucked away by your conflicts, you are missing the point of your life.

This same principle is true in your personal relationships. When you run into huge conflicts with another person, and like Paul and Barnabas the disagreement becomes so sharp that you must part company, eventually you may have to commend that person to the grace of the Lord. Only then can you get moving again with your mission in life.

It is important to remember that Barnabas was filled with the Holy Spirit, and Paul was filled with the Holy Spirit. We may wonder how two people could both be led by the Spirit and make conflicting choices. Did one of them make the wrong choice about the will of God? Maybe. Or it could be that God's will is not so easily reduced to our choices. Strictly speaking, God's will is about God's choices. And God will use our choices, even the conflicted ones, to fulfill the mission of Jesus Christ with us.

This coming June, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church will meet for its biennial gathering. The most controversial thing it will do is review the report of a Task Force on Peace, Unity and Purity, which is actually a proposal for staying together as a church with dramatically different views of sexuality. The report has already been released and some on both the left and the right don't like it. Plowshares are already being beat into swords; rumors of a church split have begun once again. I've been in ministry for almost 25 years now, and am experiencing a massive case of *deja vu*. (Only the Presbyterians would threaten to split over a proposal for unity.) Clearly, this debate will rivet the attention of our denomination this summer. I'm sure you'll be reading about it in the papers, and I wanted you to be ready for this. Those on both sides are

filled with the Holy Spirit, and they will both assure themselves that they are fighting for a righteous cause. But the conflict will prevent us, again, from focusing on the mission of Christ in the world around the church.

Paul wrote a great deal about church unity. The divisions in the church in Corinth drove him nuts. But why? Because it was preoccupying the church with its own maintenance, and preventing it from serving and enjoying Jesus Christ. "Some of you," Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "say 'I belong to Paul.' Others say 'I belong to Apollos.' Others say 'I belong to Peter.' The elitists say 'I belong to Jesus.'" (1 Cor 1:12) "You all belong to Christ," Paul claimed, "and Christ belongs to God." (1 Cor 3:23) So knock it off. There is work to do. There is joy to receive. There is a unity that comes not from consensus, and not even from the will of the majority, but from the common salvation we all have in Jesus Christ.

In Jesus Christ we have all been brought home to the one God. The fact that many Protestant denominations may argue among themselves about sex (and by the way all serious church debates take at least a hundred years to resolve), or the fact that Catholics and Protestants have different ideas about what happens at the table, or the fact that we bring a great diversity of political and social opinions with us into worship, doesn't mean that we are not made one by Jesus Christ. None of those "facts" define the church. The moment we allow that to happen we are defining the church of Christ at the boundaries, and he will never permit that. Christ's church can be defined only at the center, where he alone is found, and that center is strong enough to hold the church together.

That doesn't mean we take disagreements lightly or think they are unimportant. The unity of the church is very important. But our unity isn't found in agreement. Not even in agreement about extremely important moral or justice issues. Our only source of unity is the grace of Jesus Christ — to which we all cling for our only hope.

When the Civil War was raging in our country, people in both the North and South were earnestly seeking God's direction. It now seems ridiculous to us that anyone could think that slavery is the will of God, but in that time the church was both filled with the Holy Spirit and quite divided over this issue. At the height of the war, Joseph Gilmore, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Philadelphia tried to raise his congregation's vision above the war that was tearing the nation apart. One Sunday, preaching out of the 23rd Psalm, he said the promise of Scripture is that God is leading us. "We do not know where. We do not know how God could lead a divided nation, or how he could lead those with whom we disagree about such profound issues. But we believe he will lead us all, North and South, to the still waters of peace."