



There is a fascinating story about a church that went through a time of difficulty that ended in the church splitting into two congregations. The new church needed a name, and those remaining in the church decided they would rename their congregation as well. Without realizing the irony, perhaps, they named themselves Harmony Church and Unity Church.

We are continuing a series of messages *Living In A Divided World*, and this morning we come to the message *A House Divided*, which focuses on the divisions within churches and among God's people (it is not, as the title might suggest, about those homes that are divided in their loyalties between the University of Kentucky and the University of Louisville, although I did borrow the title from that rivalry). I think it is safe to say that, when it comes to churches, there has been no shortage of conflict and troubles over the course of the history of the church. Conflicts, both large and small, have been part of the church from the beginning. Those of us who have been around churches all our lives are familiar with the hurt feelings and institutional wreckage that comes with those times of conflict. Sometimes, the conflict in churches can be so severe that it drives people to join what has been called the *church alumni society*, that is, those people who have been so burned or so hurt by church conflict that they walk away from church, never to return. I should also hasten to add that I am not offering this message in response to any situation, just in case you were wondering *is Dave trying to tell us something?* Of all the churches I have served, this has been my favorite church. As a congregation, you have treated me with much kindness, generosity, and other good things. I am very grateful to be here, and I am very grateful for the health of our congregation as well.

Our Scripture text for this morning comes from I Corinthians 11:17-26. Follow along as I read –

17 In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good.

18 In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it.

19 No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval.

20 So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat,

21 for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk.

22 Don't you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!

23 For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread,

24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me."

25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."

26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

The apostle Paul, who was not generally prone to understatement, made an exception to that tendency when he wrote these words in verse 18 – *I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you.* Normally, Paul was very direct and to the point, but in this instance he was much more understated in his assessment of the goings-on in Corinth. Simply put, the church was a mess. Full of conflict and all manner of problems, Paul wrote to the congregation in order to sort out the struggles they were experiencing. It wasn't just the church in Corinth, however, that kept Paul busy. Paul devoted a good deal of his time and energy to helping other churches work through their difficulties. As a missionary and church-planter, Paul had worked to establish many of the churches throughout the Roman Empire and as he had a hand in their founding, he was often called upon to help them solve their problems.

Considering what Paul has to say, I want to offer a few words of advice this morning, the first being,

1. The church is created and ordained by God and is God's gift to us, but it is populated by fallible human beings.

If you are familiar with the history of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), you will be familiar with a great irony in that history. The founders of the movement that led to our churches – leaders such as Thomas Campbell and his son Alexander, Barton W. Stone, and Walter Scott – lived during the time of frontier America, a time when the church had fractured into many divisions and denominations. Looking around at the religious landscape, they believed it was incumbent upon them to work to bring a sense of unity to the overall church, lessening divisions, and joining together under the cause of adhering to the simple, basic gospel of the New Testament era. What they quickly did, however, was to add three more divisions to that religious landscape that was already littered with numerous denominations and church divisions. (To add an interesting note – my home church – Wellsburg Christian Church, in Wellsburg, West Virginia – is the oldest church with a direct lineage to the Campbells and the beginnings of the Restoration Movement, which spawned the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the Independent Christian Churches/Churches and Christ, and the Churches of Christ, non-instrumental. When the Campbells arrived in this country from Scotland, they settled in the Washington, Pennsylvania area, establishing the Brush Run congregation. Eventually the Campbells, and the Brush Run congregation, moved on to Wellsburg, establishing the congregation that continues there, and is my home church. That church, once affiliated with the Disciples of Christ, affiliated with the Independent churches during the time of Restructure).

My home church has had its share of ups and downs over the years. Our church, and the goings-on there, served as the main dish at many Sunday lunches in my family's home as we talked up that various ups and downs. Some of those conversations were good, uplifting, and positive. Others were, well, less so. I remember years ago, when I was in high school, observing one of the most difficult moments I can remember taking place in a church. Our minister at the time, Bill Norris, was a very good man, and a great example and mentor to me. Reverend Norris was very funny, caring, and well-loved in our community. There was one family in our church, however, that had it in for him. One Sunday, during the course of his message, Reverend Norris remarked that *if you can't say anything good about a person you ought to keep your big, fat mouth shut.* I remember we laughed at his comment, thinking it to be

rather good advice. The next Sunday, however, right before the sermon time, a member of the family that opposed Reverend Norris suddenly arose out of his seat and walked to the pulpit. He stood in the pulpit and began to criticize Reverend Norris for including that line in his previous week's message. After haranguing Reverend Norris for several minutes about his language, the man then made a motion that Reverend Norris be immediately dismissed from the church. Well, it didn't take but a few moments for a chaotic scene to erupt. In the midst of the chaos a young lady rose to her feet. She was sitting on the other side of the sanctuary from me, and she was a member of my high school class (we were, at the time, juniors, I believe). The young lady was pregnant and unmarried, which did not lead to very good treatment of her in that day and time. She stood there, however, and spoke movingly of how Reverend Norris had reached out to her and her family and what a difference it made to her. I remember being very moved and impressed by her words. After she sat down, others stood up and expressed their thanks for what Reverend Norris had done for their families. After several spoke, my father and another one of our other elders stood up from the choir loft, walked to the pulpit, and each one took the man by an arm and led him out of the sanctuary. I have never forgotten that scene. It was a very difficult moment of conflict that ended in a powerful affirmation of what our church and minister meant to members of the congregation. It was a difficult moment that became a moment that was very much needed.

I can say, without hesitation, that church conflict is never pleasant. I can also say, without hesitation, that church conflict is inevitable. It is inevitable because conflict is a byproduct of all types of relationships. It is easy to believe that conflict should not come to the church – as it is also easy to believe that church people ought to rise above such petty actions and attitudes – but the church is a divinely-ordained institution that is populated by fallible, sometimes petty human beings, and those human beings bring not only the best of themselves, but sometimes the worst.

I will also admit that, sometimes, the church has been its own worst enemy. The televangelist scandals of the 80s and 90s were an embarrassment to the church, and a prime example of the way in which the church can sometimes shoot itself in the foot. We have also witnessed now, for several decades, the terrible scandal of abuse in the Catholic Church. Nothing, in my lifetime, has brought greater harm to the church than this terrible scandal, a scandal that is the fault of the Church as it has allowed it to continue to do so much damage to so many innocent lives. This summer, we witnessed the fall of Bill Hypels, founding pastor of Willow Creek Church outside of Chicago, one of the largest churches in the country. I could go on and on, unfortunately, but I think you get my point.

One of the important matters about conflict that we must always remember is this – though conflict is inevitable and natural, it must be handled in a healthy manner. Conflict becomes very hurtful and damaging when it is handled poorly and in unhealthy ways. Conflict can actually lead to growth, improvement, and positive outcomes when it is handled in healthy ways. None of the examples I just offered were handled in healthy ways. Every one of them are examples of how conflict, scandal, and harm should not be handled.

Paul was often drawn into church conflict. In fact, many of the New Testament letters written by Paul exist because he wrote them as a result of conflict in the churches with which he ministered. Reading closely – and sometimes not so closely – it is easy to find examples of Paul speaking to conflicts on an institutional scale (such as one of this verse from Sunday's Scripture text – I Corinthians 11:18, *I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you* and Philippians 4:2 – *I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.*)

2. *Conflict is natural and inevitable, but does not need to be fatal.*

The summer after I graduated from high school I attended what was called Life Recruit Week at church camp. Life Recruit Week was designed for those young people who sensed that God was, perhaps, leading them into what we call “full-time Christian service,” that is, positions of vocational ministry such as pastors, evangelists, and missionaries. At the end of the week, at Friday night's

worship service, I walked down the aisle of our vespers area to publicly acknowledge my belief that God was calling me into ministry. I had sensed it for a long time, but it continued to take a good while for me to fully accept what this realization meant to my life. Even though many of my friends – even my friends who never went to church or thought much about faith – assumed I would become a minister, it took me some time to discern that call. When I got home from camp on Saturday my mom and I discussed my decision, but interestingly, the first thing she said to me after I told her I had made a public commitment to ministry was, *just remember, there is no shame in ever leaving the ministry*. That’s a sign that someone has experienced some interesting moments in church life! And, to be honest, there have been plenty of times when I thought maybe it was time to do something else with my life. There have been times I was ready to throw in the towel and do something else. There have even been times when I went on job interviews to pursue other vocational options, but my sense of call would not let me go, even when I really wanted it to.

I still remember many of those conflicts in my home church, and how difficult and painful some of them were. But here is another important truth – it is my home church and I love the people there. The same people who created some of the headaches and problems were the same people who taught me in Sunday School and VBS, the same people who prayed for me and loved me, and it is important to say this – it is easier to accept the faults and shortcomings of others when you love them and when they love you, so while I can tell you negative stories about church conflict in my home congregation, I can tell you many more about the saints who have populated that church for so many years and who have meant so much to me throughout the course of my life.

All relationships have byproducts. Some of those byproducts are beautiful and wonderful, such as love, companionship, and friendship. Some of those byproducts are less than beautiful and wonderful, such as conflict. When we consider the reality of conflict, however, we must remember that it is a natural and inevitable part of every relationship, including relationships in a church and among churches. Why should we not expect conflict when we are dealing with people who are struggling, broken, stumbling, stressed-out, burned out, troubles pieces of humanity? What else should we expect? I understand that people have higher expectations of churches and church people, and I agree with that, but we are as human and as fallible as anyone else and that’s why grace is such an important part of relationships.

I find it interesting to study the twelve that Jesus chose to be his closest followers. When we read a bit closer about these twelve individuals, we find that they had much potential for conduct. Matthew was a tax collector (Matthew 9:9), and as a tax collector he would have been viewed as a traitor to his own people, since he worked for the Roman government. Simon, one of the other disciples, was a Zealot (Matthew 10:4). The Zealots were a political group dedicated to the overthrow of the Roman occupiers, by violence of any other means necessary. Imagine, in a small group of twelve disciples there was someone who worked for the Romans and someone dedicated to their defeat. I wonder how that worked out? Some of the disciples were fishermen – Peter, Andrew, James, and John (Matthew 4:18-22) – and as fishermen they were small businessmen, and perhaps they had to pay their taxes to Matthew. I wonder how that made them feel. James and John invoked indignation among the disciples when they asked Jesus for preferential treatment in his kingdom, asking that one could sit on his right hand and the other on his left (Mark 10:35-45) (and on another occasion their mother asked – Matthew 20:20-28). There are other factors that could easily have triggered conflict between the disciples, but it is interesting that one has to read the gospels closely to find them. What this tells me is that the disciples learned, under the leadership of Jesus, how to manage their differences in healthy ways (there is, of course, the one large exception of Judas betraying Jesus).

Conflict is normal and inevitable, but we must always work for healthy, not unhealthy, conflict. Relationships that focus on healthy expressions of conflict are relationships that grow, prosper, flourish, and thrive.

3. *It is worth fighting for what you love.*

We have all heard the old (and, in my opinion, very false) contention that the church has caused more wars, been at the root of more violence, and brought about more problems and suffering than anything else in the history of humanity. Why, to listen to some, the church might even be the cause of the stormy weather this weekend! This false narrative, claiming that the church is the root of the majority of the world's suffering and violence, would seek to convince us that we should distance ourselves from the church because of the failings of the church. This is what we would call the argument of complicity – if you are attached to or involved with any institution that perpetuates suffering or wrongdoing you are complicit in the sins and failures of that institution. There is a very big problem with the argument of complicity, however, and it is this – unless we move to a mountaintop and removed ourselves from everything we are in some way complicit, if we follow that line of reasoning. Every institution, we have learned – and learned painfully in recent years – has guilt on its hands. Are we to withdraw from everything in life, distance ourselves from every institution, and fall into despair and lack of involvement in any meaningful work? No, not at all! I believe, for one, that the failures of the church are not a reflection upon God as much as they are a reflection on the brokenness and sinfulness of humanity. It is a tragedy, I believe, that some people associate the failings of the church with God and the will of God, and thus walk away not only from the church, but also from God. I believe that we are to fight for what we love, and that includes the church. I love the church. I have been a part of the church for the entirety of my life and plan to be part of the church for the remainder of my life. I can't imagine any circumstance that would cause me to turn away from the church. That is not to say, however, that I would not change churches. I have been in situations that become toxic and hurtful to the point that I realized I needed to move to another congregation, and that type of experience is what played a large role in my coming to this church. The church, with all of its faults, failures, and shortcomings, is a gift from God to help in nurturing our faith, in discipling us, in providing comfort and fellowship, and providing for so many other important needs that we have. That is never to excuse however, what some churches do that is wrong. It does not excuse the terrible scourge of abuse in the Catholic Church. It does not excuse the subjugation of women in so many churches, and it does not excuse the authoritarian behavior that is sometimes exhibited by church leaders, or any other toxic behavior. For me, though, I will stay and work and fight for change that is needed, because I love the church. I am not going to walk out the doors of the church forever, turning my back on what has been a great gift of God in my life.

We are called to do what Jesus led the disciples to do – to love and serve, and when we love and serve others, we will be too busy and too occupied to engage in the kinds of conflict that is destructive and hurtful. Let's not tear down – let's build up!