

Sermon for 15 August 2010
Pentecost 12; Proper 15, Year C

+In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Conflict is a normal part of relationships, particularly close relationships, and we all have different ways of dealing with it. Sometimes those ways are healthy, and sometimes they aren't. There are those that love a good fight and will launch into any which arises. At the risk of dealing in stereotypes, such pugnacious people often find there way into politics, for reasons which are obvious enough. Then there are those who avoid conflict at all costs. This might seem to us the wise path, but often it means that issues of the greatest import are neglected because too few had the courage to stand up and fight for what is right. What might have been avoided if, say, Neville Chamberlain hadn't appeased Hitler? That, of course, is an extreme example, but there are so many times

when conscience may lead us into conflict, and for those of us without the natural temerity of a politician, acting conscientiously could be a most difficult thing.

Sometimes our problem is in misunderstanding the requirements of the Gospel. We've watered down Jesus' teaching, and believe its principle command is something like "be nice". Now, don't get me wrong: I like to be nice and for people to be nice to me. Peevishness and petulance are not a good way of showing the love of Christ. Even so, running from conflict when the stakes are high, when the truths of the Gospel and the wellbeing of God's people are on the line, in an effort to "be nice" is terribly harmful for the cause in which we as Christians are engaged.

Jesus says to his disciples in this morning's Gospel, "Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division." That's Luke's version, and Matthew's is

even stronger "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword."

What follows is even more shocking. I'm sure it was upsetting to hear Jesus validate discord in families. But put yourself back in the first century, and imagine that you were raised in a good Jewish family, or even a Greek family which had been faithful in serving the pagan gods of Rome. Then imagine that you hear the Good News of God in Christ, that you are convicted of the truth of Christ's death and resurrection, that you wish to serve the one true and living God as His Son had revealed Him. This would not have been a popular choice. It would most certainly have led to discord, and perhaps you would have been disowned by those you loved most of all. Would it then have been better that you never received the Gospel of life? Would it then have been better to shun that glorious news for the sake of peace at home? Would

God have preferred it if you had taken the path which avoided conflict? By no means!

We still have these choices today, and sometimes they can even have consequences as dramatic as the choices those early disciples had to make. Here in the Bible Belt, we sometimes forget that there is now a whole generation of people being raised by basically irreligious parents. If you don't believe me, come with me to the church I worked at in Brooklyn sometime, and you'll meet plenty of young Christians whose family relationships have been strained ever since they turned from the righteous path of secular humanism to become Christians. It is a strange phenomenon to somebody from Arkansas, but it has happened even here. And that is not to mention all those countless people today in places like China who have been shunned because of their commitment to Christ and his Church.

And then there are those choices we make for the sake of conscience that aren't exactly the same, but carry with them the same issues. Plenty of people became outcasts in their families or their communities when they acted on a conviction that securing civil rights for blacks was a Christian imperative. Plenty of people have suffered domestic strife because they felt God calling them to be a missionary or to take up a vocation demanding poverty or celibacy despite it being unpopular with others.

Last week I preached about conviction, and today I have to add to those thoughts by suggesting that Jesus requires of us the development of a virtue which compliments it. That virtue is *courage*. Our convictions, as I said last week, compel us to act, but we must grow in courage to make it happen. When we learn that, as that wonderful hymn put it "the peace of God is no peace, but strife closed in the sod", then courage will be required if we are

to confront the conflict into which our Christian commitments bring us. What all those people listed in today's Epistle had in common was the courage to act on faith. Rahab and Gideon and Barak and Samson and Jephthah and David and Samuel and the prophets and the whole people of Israel in their flight from Egypt— all of them had the courage to risk their lives and their livelihoods and all they held dear because they were convicted by God and His promise.

With so great a cloud of witnesses, how can we but do the same? Let us, then, face strife with courage, not running away, not deciding to "just be nice", but *standing up* for that which really matters. We may think ourselves too timid, but the God of Hosts is with us, and by Him are we enheartened. Let us stand up for Jesus, not fearing loss, for our only gain is his banner, the wondrous Cross.

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Amen.