

Good Conflict MANAGEMENT

Sermon, June 12, 2016

Text: I Kings 17:1-5; 18:1, 17-19

Right about this exact time twenty-nine years ago (*actually, about an hour or so earlier*), June 12, 1987, I was at the American Embassy Club in Bonn, Germany, watching on a jumbo television screen as former President Ronald Reagan spoke in front of the Brandenburg Gate at the Berlin Wall ¹ about four hundred miles from Bonn; it was at the commemoration of the 750th anniversary of the founding of Berlin. In that speech President Reagan issued a direct challenge to Mikhail Gorbachev, leader of the Soviet Union:

"We welcome change and openness; for we believe that freedom and security go together, that the advance of human liberty can only strengthen the cause of world peace. There is one sign the Soviets can make that would be unmistakable, that would advance dramatically the cause of freedom and peace. General Secretary Gorbachev, if you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, if you seek liberalization: Come here to this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, TEAR DOWN THIS WALL!"

President Reagan and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl then left the Brandenburg gate with their entourages and went to Berlin's Tegel airport, where they boarded planes and flew to the Bonn/Cologne airport; where I and many others from the American community were now waiting (*we had left the Embassy Club just after the speech ended; it was about a twenty minute drive to the airport*) with a crowd of Germans on temporary bleachers set up on the tarmac. I watched as the huge Air Force One jumbo jet circled and landed, followed by the second Air Force One jumbo jet (*only one of the Air Force Ones actually carries the president; the other is a decoy*), followed by yet a third jumbo jet (*this one containing most of the press*). President Reagan and Chancellor Kohl deplaned and gave brief speeches from a makeshift podium; the Chancellor then came into our crowd to shake hands while Mr. Reagan was more or less hurried away by a crowd of Secret Service "men in black." I was able to shake Mr. Kohl's rather massive hand ... now, I'm not a little guy and my hands are not all that small, but his hand wrapped around mine as if I were a skinny teenager; he was a BIG man. Anyway, twenty-nine months after that date twenty-nine years ago ... Berliners did tear down that wall. It was a day of incredible rejoicing on November 9, 1989 when that dreaded Wall opened up.²

The cable channel program "Decades" has been featuring movies and film documentaries all week commemorating the life of Ronald Reagan, as the twelfth anniversary of his June 5, 2004 passing was last Sunday. In what was something of a divine coincidence last week (*I'd like to say we planned it, but we didn't*), we sang as our opening hymn "O Love of God, How Strong and True", which was majestically sung at his June 10, 2004 funeral at the National Cathedral.³ He had his critics, but the historical record is clear -- President Reagan was not a man who avoided conflict; he managed conflict masterfully on the national and international stage. He knew how to choose his battles; which battles to engage and when, and which to simply avoid or postpone ... and his ability to manage conflict arguably helped change the map of the modern world for good. In contrast, in our Scripture lesson today we have one of the greatest conflict avoiders in all history ... but I'll get to that in a minute.

David Augsberger, in an excellent little book entitled Caring Enough To Confront, writes: "*Conflict is natural, normal, neutral, and sometimes even delightful. It can turn into painful or disastrous ends, but it doesn't need to. Conflict is neither good nor bad, right or wrong. Conflict simply is. How we view, approach and work through our conflicts does -- to a large extent -- determine our whole life pattern.*" Now, we don't like conflict and confrontation. We have a natural aversion to it, and sometimes that is good. We don't have to fight every potential battle that comes our way. But sometimes conflict can be for our good. Conflict is the normal part and parcel of the human condition; always has been and always will be. How we view conflict, how we approach conflict, how we manage conflict ... or, how we avoid conflict ... really can determine our whole life pattern.

¹ The Berlin Wall was a barrier constructed by the ironically named German Democratic Republic (communist East Germany) starting on August 13, 1961, cutting off West Berlin from surrounding East Germany and East Berlin. The GDR authorities called it the "Antifascistischer Schutzwall," or "antifascist bulwark." The official purpose of this Berlin Wall was to keep Western "fascists" from entering East Germany and undermining the socialist state, but its actual (cynical) purpose was the primary objective of stemming mass defections from East to West. The Wall was actually two parallel walls, each eleven feet high, topped by barbed wire. Between the walls was an area known as the "no man's land." Refugees who had reached that area were shot. There was a trench to prevent vehicles from breaking through, there were watchdogs, watchtowers and bunkers. Well over one hundred people were killed trying to escape over the years.

² Some of you may also remember my telling you that almost at the exact moment the surprise announcement went out over the German news allowing free passage through the Wall, my then-girlfriend was consenting to be my fiancée as we stood in the huge shadow of the Cologne Cathedral ... much to Ann's and my surprise, fireworks and hoots and hollers started echoing all around us just after she consented; we had no idea what was going on @ 400 miles to the north. What a night!

³ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Yda2wajCOU>

According to the Bible, conflict started the moment Adam and Eve left Paradise. The biblical story begins with the killing of a brother and it ends with Armageddon and there's a whole lot of conflict in between, so don't think the Bible contains just a few gentle teachings on peace and love. Jesus said (*Matthew 10:34*), "*Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.*" Part of what Jesus meant by that is that from the moment Adam and Eve reached for more than they were created to have, God has been in conflict with a world that has just lost its way. And with the Incarnation, in the arrival of Jesus Christ, we find nothing less than the loving and redemptive entrance of God Himself into the midst of our conflicts. So, one might say that the point of worship is not to come here and find sanctuary from conflict (*although it can provide a respite*). Nor is it to avoid conflict. The point is to enter our conflicts with the eyes of faith wide open; it is often in our conflicts and struggles that we find the gracious hand of our Savior Who will lead us through. To totally avoid conflict is (a) not possible, (b) is ultimately to potentially avoid encountering the grace of God, and (c) often only makes matters worse. To be sure, this isn't to say that we should run around trying to jump into conflict whenever and wherever ... the Bible has a name for people who do that sort of thing (*see Proverbs 20:3, "... every fool is quick to quarrel..."*). However, there are times when conflict needs to be met head-on, especially when avoidance only results in the worsening of the difficulty.

It was not the best of times for Israel in the ninth century B.C., although there was a modicum of stability and tenuous security. The nation had been split in two by civil war, resulting in the ascension of Ahab's father, Omri, to the throne. When Ahab assumed rule, the economy was in shambles, and the Assyrians were threatening to invade from the north. Ahab managed to bring things to a tenuous stability; the economy was still fragile, and the Assyrians were still threatening. Ahab was doing the best he could to manage these potentially frightening affairs of state. He built a new capital city in Samaria, and he developed political alliances. Perhaps his strongest alliance was in the marriage that had been arranged for him by his father Omri, a marriage to the daughter of the king of the Phoenicians. The Phoenician princess was a woman named ... Jezebel.

Now, this was the best of times for the Phoenicians. At this time they were politically, militarily, and economically far superior to Israel. So Princess Jezebel brought quite a dowry with her to this marriage. She brought new trade agreements, new ports on the Mediterranean Sea, political security ... but she also brought along her fanatical devotion to the Phoenician god Baal. I'll speak more about Baal next week, but for now it's enough to know that the Phoenicians had been worshiping this Baal for a long time, and, it seemed to Ahab, they were doing a lot better than Israel.

Baal was a fertility idol who promised growth; he promised to make the rain fall and the earth fruitful and thereby provide a strong economy. So when Jezebel moved into the palace, Ahab granted her request to set up a little altar and temple to Baal in the capital city of Samaria. Ahab probably thought it was no a big deal. No need to conflict with his headstrong and temperamental wife over such a seemingly trivial thing. When Jezebel then brought in some four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal, it still seemed harmless enough; Ahab allowed it thinking he was just being religiously tolerant and besides, he may have reasoned, a little religious tolerance and pluralism might do his monotheistic and narrow minded nation some good. When Jezebel then started having the altars of God torn down, maybe Ahab thought it was a little much, but he assumed it was part of her fanatic devotion to this harmless god. Ahab didn't want any more conflict; he didn't want to get entangled in all these religious issues. He had enough conflict just trying lead his country out of its economic and military peril. Maybe he didn't think he was turning his back on God; he was just being tolerant, seeking to keep the peace. But he was married to a fanatic ... and in a contest between a conflict avoider and a determined fanatic, the fanatic will always triumph. When she began having some of the prophets and priests of God killed off, Ahab realized it was too late to stop her.

When God saw His faithful prophets being slaughtered in the streets of Israel, and when He saw Ahab doing nothing to confront this travesty, God decided to get involved in the conflict. He called on a man named Elijah to stand before the king and announce there would be a great drought in the land. This has a wonderful sense of irony to it since Baal was the "god" who was supposed to ensure that the rain would keep falling. As we picked up the story in chapter 18, it was after some three years of drought that Elijah again stood before the king. When Ahab saw Elijah, he said, "*Is that you, you troubler of Israel?*" Which, by the way, is a classic response for a conflict avoider ... conflict avoiders are quick to lay the blame on anyone besides themselves. However, more often than not the conflicts and troubles grow exponentially when they are not addressed early on by those who choose to avoid the responsibility. These troubles aren't Elijah's fault, they're largely Ahab's. Ahab calls Elijah the troublemaker ... but the only thing Elijah did was to speak and live by the truth. Elijah responds by saying, in so many words, "*I have not made trouble for Israel, but you and your father's family have. You've all avoided the good conflict! You have abandoned the Lord's commands and have followed the Baals.*"

Then Elijah chooses the time for the good and necessary conflict, calling for a showdown between God and Baal. The stage is set. And next week we are going to look at this contest between God and Baal up on Mt. Carmel, one of the most dramatic passages of the entire Bible.