

“Cleaning House”

1 Corinthians 5: 1-5

We finish up this Sunday with our series on “Recovering Christianity” and we do so with another strange text from Paul to the Corinthians. I’m sure as I was reading the Scripture this morning, many of us were wondering what on earth are we going to be talking about in this sermon.

Well, I hate to disappoint anyone but we are not going to be talking about sex in the church. That’s another sermon for another day. What we are going to be dealing with this morning is conflict in the church. I saved this one for last because this topic is one of our uglier skeletons in our proverbial closet.

Conflict in church is not anything new. We’ve probably all heard stories about how conflict in the church tore a community of faith apart, leaving people feeling hurt and angry, but worse of all the conflict leaves the Body of Christ even more broken and splintered than before. Conflict in the church is not anything new. It happens each and every day. In fact, let’s be honest, we may have even left churches in the past because of certain conflicts going on there. We just didn’t want to be a part of it. It was ugly. It was hateful. It was soul-suckingly painful to see a group of people tear each other apart, over what. Half the time, church people

aren't even sure what they are fighting about in those times. All they know is that they heard that so and so did this or so and so doesn't agree with them but no one ever bothers to figure out what is truly going on. Usually the issue starts out minor but no one wants to talk about it or deal with it so it gets blown out of proportion until it is too late to deal with it rationally. By the time this all happens, emotions have taken over and all hopes of reconciliation have gone out the window. All because no one bothered to talk about the issue at hand. The church just likes to pretend that we all get along as we plaster fake smiles on our faces. Once again, a word of caution, as Paul said in last week's text, that's the danger of dealing with gossip and half-truths. Trouble gets started and no one knows the full story. Everyone is just assuming. And we all know what happens when people assume things.

I'm not saying anything that we don't already know. I'm not saying anything earth-shattering or out of place. We all know conflict in the church exists. In fact, I'm sure that's one of the main reasons many people don't want to be connected with the Church nowadays. I bet if we asked anyone who is not connected to the church in any way why they don't attend church, one of the main reasons they would give is that church people are all a bunch of hypocrites, meaning that we as people of faith talk about love and grace, we talk about building up the Body of Christ, we talk about the unity found in our community but all that nice fine talk

goes away as soon as there is an issue or conflict brewing in the church. Soon all those people who are supposed to love another are calling each other names as part of a knock down drag out fight. So in a lot of people's mind, it is just easier to say we are all hypocrites and not got to church to avoid the drama altogether. And as a person of faith, I can't say that I blame them for this avoidance attitude. But I would argue that they are not only losing out on the opportunity to experience the Kingdom of God here on earth, we as the church are also missing out on an opportunity as well, the opportunity to share God's grace and love in ways that more healing and renewing and accepting than hypocritical.

We have no one else to blame that this avoidance attitude and response is out there as the reputation of the church. The Church has earned it.

I can't say that I blame people for wanting to avoid the drama that comes with conflict in the church. We've all seen the damage conflict can inflict on the community of faith. We have all experienced the wreckage conflict can leave in its wake in a community of faith. And really no one wants to be a part of that. Even church people don't want to be a part of that. It's painful. It's hurtful. It's hateful. And it is certainly not what God intended when God invited us to be in covenant with God and with one another.

So what do we do? How do we move past this avoidance behavior and invite people to come to the table once more? We know we can't avoid conflict. We know it has happened in the church and in this church. And I'm sure this comes as no surprise, it is not going away any time soon. For one reason being, we are all human. We are not perfect. We all have our baggage. We all have our misunderstandings. We can all get cranky and grumpy and have our bad days when we say something or do something that causes conflict or hurt someone's feeling when we certainly didn't mean it to. That's what makes us humans. Sometimes I wonder why God puts up with us in the first place. I wonder why God still wants to be in relationship with us as God's people, because since the beginning of time, humankind has been in some sort of conflict with each other. I don't know if it is in our nature or it is a convenient excuse but I bet it is safe to say that conflict has been around since God created humankind. I imagine it was even there in the Garden of Eden, the most perfect place on earth. The first fight probably occurred, when, innocently enough, Eve put on a fig leaf and asked Adam if it made her look fat. And the fight has been going on ever since. Conflict between men and women. Conflict between nations. Conflict between churches. Conflict between tribes. Conflict on the school playground. Conflict. Conflict. Conflict.

Our world is full of conflict and as much as we want to deny it, our churches are also full of conflict as well. Conflict is a reality that confronts us each and

every day. Conflict is a reality that also confronts our churches each and every day regardless of how loving and how caring the people may be. Conflict is a reality simply because we are human. That's a given. But that doesn't mean we have to give into conflict or let it control our lives. We can take the opportunity to let conflict strengthen us and remind us that as people of faith we are called to a different way. What matters for us, as the church moves forward and begins to recover from all negativity that has been following the church for two thousand years is to remember that we as people of faith are called to handle conflict with grace, with mercy, with love, and with forgiveness. We are called to remember at all times we are the people of God, that we are the signs of God's Kingdom within our churches and within our world as well.

And for us to see how to live this out in our lives as hard as it may be, we need once again to turn to our text today.

As we may remember, Paul is writing to this group in Corinth because they have been fighting and arguing. And in this particular part of the letter, Paul starts dealing with the conflicts, no longer addressing them in a general sense but by naming the individual issues that are plaguing the church one by one. Paul has heard that a man is sleeping with his stepmother and it is time to deal with the problem. Now, here is where we might say, okay we get that things like this are not usually done but Paul does seem a little extreme in his reaction. Well, before we

start arguing with Paul and causing more fights, we need to realize that the situation Paul is addressing is a really bad situation in itself. And this man's behavior is made even worse in appearance because it seems that the church condones it by ignoring it. Which in lies the issue.

Let me explain. We all know that there are rules that we are called to follow that tell us how we are supposed to act as the people of God, the Ten Commandments being just a few. Well, this man's actions are against the law of God. It clearly states in Leviticus that a man should not be sleeping with his father's wife. As I said, there are certain rules about how we are supposed to live in community with one another, how we are to treat each other, how we are supposed to take care of others, how we are supposed to be as the people of God. And if the church isn't going to pay attention to God's laws than who is. Why would anyone trust in the integrity of God if we as the people of God don't reflect it in all we do and say?

So Paul reminds the Corinthians of this and says that Once again, one's person actions are tearing apart the community and unity of the church in Corinth. They are ignoring God's word. They are picking and choosing what they will and will not follow as the people of God. And in doing so, they are creating more conflict within the church.

Now here is what is so ironic about the situation. We can almost imagine Paul's letter being read out loud during the church service and when they get to this part in the letter, there is a collective gasp in the church. Not because they are outraged by the behavior but because Paul had the audacity to bring it up in the first place. The Corinthians thought it best to keep it swept under the rug and pretend nothing was wrong but Paul all of a sudden throws back the rug and there are dust bunnies everywhere! And now they have to deal with the issue at hand. They have to do a little spring cleaning!

Paul does this because he knows better than anyone that we can't pretend that issues don't exist. We can't pretend that we all get along. We can't pretend that tensions don't exist among the community of faith. It just not true. And we wouldn't be being the authentic community of God if we pretended otherwise.

All pretending ever does is let the conflict simmer. It lets the conflict stew. And then it blows up when the least little thing upsets the balance.

So in this situation what Paul is mad about is that in not talking about the issue, the Corinthians were causing more problem and creating more conflict in the community than just simply bringing the issue out into the open. So Paul rips off the proverbial band-aid and lets the wound come to light so that it can get some air and begin healing.

Paul calls them out on their behavior and says Look, I may not be there in person but if you are too afraid to deal with in person, then I'll deal with in a letter. I'll name it and then the community can't hide from it. Paul is forcing them to deal with the issue at hand even though they would rather avoid it or pretend that it doesn't exist.

Now here once again is why I love this text. It would be so easy for Paul to name the issue and then walk away, leaving the Corinthians to pick up the pieces. But he doesn't do that. He reminds them that at the very heart of the community is God. They are surrounded by God's power and love and these things will guide the conversation. That's their starting point in facing the conflict in the church.

No one is to start pointing fingers. No one is to start calling each other names. No one is to let their emotions get the best of them. Paul reminds this community that they are called to deal with conflict in another way, God's way, and it is a way of love. It is a way of peace. And more importantly it is a way of grace and mercy.

You see there is a difference in the way the world handles conflict and the way the Kingdom of God handles conflict. The world tells us that in each and every conflict there has to be a winner and there has to be a loser. There is no other way. So whoever strikes the first blow gets an advantage over his or her opponent.

The uglier one can fight, the better chance that one will win. So according to the world, when the gloves come off, we have permission to say anything we want, treat anyone the way we want, do anything we want just as long as we win. That's how conflict is solved in our world. Think about it. Peace Talks end because nations believe that if they conceded they will be viewed as powerless and weak. So nations go into Peace Talks, already looking for ways that they can come out on top. Treaties are broken because after all they are just a piece of paper. There are so many legal loopholes put in the treaties that they are easily wiggled out of by nations. That's the way of our world. In conflict, there must always be winners and losers.

But Paul reminds the Corinthians there is another way, the Kingdom of God way. He tells them bring the issue out into the open. Talk about it. Deal with it but deal with in a way that honors God. Talk about in a way that builds up the Body of Christ rather than breaks it down. Face the conflict in a way that reminds us that we are God's people, that the church is not our own personal piece of property, that this place is God's house and in this house, we are called to love another and treat each other with respect no matter how messy and confusing it may be.

What Paul reminds the Corinthians is that it is ultimately about the love and grace of God. Sure, "the world doesn't have much care or use for one who tells us to turn the other cheek, who calls us to forgive seventy times seven, and who urges

us to imitate his humble servant hood” but we as people of faith, as disciples of Christ, as ones who are called to be the heart and hand of God here on earth, we do. We know the power of God’s love. We know the life-giving nature of God’s love. We know the transforming quality of God’s grace and we are called to extend that to all of God’s children, in our world, and most importantly in God’s church. Because we aren’t going to follow God’s rules of grace, mercy and love, why should anyone else? If we can’t treat each other with grace, respect, dignity and love, than why would anyone assume that we would treat them any differently?

As people of faith, we can’t avoid conflict in our lives and in our church. It happens. And we can’t pretend that we all get along. If we do, the issues and conflict are just going to simmer under the surface and cause more problems than before. We are called to deal with them but in a way that always, always gives honor to God, that always always builds up the Body of Christ and more importantly always always respects and loves each other like God has respected and loved each of us.

What we must remember is that the difference between a loving church and a church that is constant conflict is not the amount of conflict or even the intensity of conflict but the way the community of faith responds to and resolves that conflict. We belong to God and we represent God here on earth. And everything we do, all our actions, all ours words, even how we resolve our conflict, reflects on

God. And that fact should give us a moment of pause before we start calling each other names and pointing fingers. We are signs of God's Kingdom. That should be what guides us and leads as people of faith, not the need to win each and every time. No matter how messy it may be, no matter how confusing or frustrating it may be, we must live together as the Body of Christ, showing the world there is another way. God's way. And it is a way of peace, a way of love, a way of grace and most importantly, a way of mercy.

When I sent out the Theology Tuesday this week, I asked for examples of how conflict helped people grow in community and unity, examples of how conflict can be a good thing. Unfortunately, my inbox was not flooded with examples. I don't know if everyone was busy this week, or if we really didn't have any examples of how we had experienced conflict in a good and strengthening way. At first, I was a little saddened by this but then I realized that once again, we are not perfect. And thankfully, it also means that God hasn't given up on us yet nor will God ever give up on us.

So I decided to take the silence in response to my question as a way to remind ourselves that there is another way and we are still figuring it out. I also decided that since my inbox wasn't flooded with examples of how the church had failed with its dealings with conflict, there is still hope for the church and for all of God's creation. We can still show the world there is another way. All we have to

do is talk about the issue. All we have to do is take the power away from conflict in our lives and in our churches and give the power back to God where it should be in the first place. All we have to do is remember that this is not our house, this is God's house and it is time for a little spring cleaning, using love, grace, respect, dignity and more importantly mercy to make things new once more.

May we always let the spirit and the power of God lead us and guide us in all that we do because if we don't show the world there is another way, who will?

Amen.