

NEW BEGINNINGS LUTHERAN CHURCH

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost – August 11th, 2024 (11:11 am)

CONFLICTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Psalm 34:1–8

1 Kings 19:1–8

Ephesians 4:17–5:2

John 6:35–51

The Lord Jesus Feeds Us with His Flesh, in Order to Strengthen Us with His Own Life

God the Father sent His Son into the world, so that the world might have life in Him. Now He “draws” you to His Son, Christ Jesus, by the preaching of His Gospel. “Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father” comes to Jesus, who will never cast him out but “will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:44–45). He is “the bread of life,” who “comes down from heaven” in the flesh, that you may eat of Him and “live forever” (John 6:48–51). Although “the journey is too great for you,” in the strength of this food you shall come to “the mount of God.” Do not be afraid, and do not despair, but “arise and eat” (1 Kings 19:5–8). And “no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in the futility of their minds” (Eph. 4:17), but “walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (Eph. 5:2). In Him, you have been “created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:24). Therefore, “be imitators of God, as beloved children” (Eph. 5:1), by “forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:32).

Today I want to address the issue of “church conflict.” I assume that when it comes to fighting/discussions, people in the church fall into one of three categories.

1) People who confront the people with issues with whom we disagree, and they believe that is normal and is part of life.

2) But others believe that fighting/discussions are a bad thing. Perhaps we have had our share of church conflict, and it has left such a mark upon our lives that we never want to do that ever again, so we just suck it up and avoid the uncomfortable issues altogether.

3) There may be a third group who seem to enjoy stirring the pot and drawing others into the fray.

I have come to is that, because the Church consists of flawed and sinful people like us, there will always be disagreements and differences of opinion in the Church. It’s not a sin to disagree! It’s not ungodly to hold a position different from your neighbour, or your friends, or your spouse, or your pastor. This sort of thing has always been part of the Church.

But it is how we handle our disagreement that matters. *How do we treat those with whom we are at odds? Can we maintain respect, civility, compassion and love, even amid the fight/discussion?* This is where the Church must distinguish itself from every other organization on the planet.

In Ephesians 4 which we have read today, the Apostle Paul is addressing some conflict in the church at Ephesus. Paul seems to be addressing the fact that the conflict was old, it was past, but the members of that church couldn't let it go; they were still upset over some battle lost, some argument that didn't go their way, and still punishing their church friends. I have seen congregations, where members sit on opposite sides of the sanctuary or go to a different service because years ago, they disagreed at an annual meeting. Someone wanted a red carpet in the entrance hall, someone else wanted green. And ten years later, they are still upset with each other. Whatever the conflict was about, reconciliation never fully happened, and this open wound festers for years and even generations.

This is where Paul begins today; with a recipe for getting past old conflicts and fractured church relationships (and in the families and the society, why not?). And he begins with a rather odd statement: **"Be angry, but do not sin."**

Paul believed that anger was an acceptable emotion, even for Christians but, with a qualifier. **It was alright to feel passionate about an issue, to argue a point with enthusiasm. But when our passion is hurtful to someone else, then we have crossed the line. When our focus is no longer on the issue but begins to attack the person, then we have gone too far.** And when the argument is over, when the issue has been decided, Paul says we must let it go, and move on. So, Paul adds this point to the rule; **"Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger."** At the end of the day, you leave the conflict behind. You forgive, and forget, and move forward.

Paul's words **"Do not let the sun go down on your anger"**. This is good advice for husbands and wives, as well. When we are at odds with our spouse and engage in some battle, when our heads hit the pillow at the end of the day, we forgive each other, so that the next day can begin fresh. Paul says this is how it must also be for church members / family member / citizens.

He picks up this thought of old fights and festering wounds five verses later, more directly this time. **"Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice..."** Remember that Paul is writing this letter from a Roman prison, and his audience is members of a church just like this one. He had heard that the Christians were behaving badly. Very badly! Listen to his words: bitterness, wrath, anger, slander, malice. Among fellow church members! And Paul says, **"This has got to stop!"**

What issue could be so important in a church that would cause members to feel wrath toward one another? What argument is so compelling that it would cause Christians

to slander one another, lie to one another, and act maliciously toward one another? When we are in a loving and peaceful congregation like NBLC has been, it's hard to imagine. But if you've been in a congregation where there is a fight brewing, you know that it can happen. A small issue festers and grows into a larger one... and it is usually about the pastor, by the way!

Conflicts happened and we should direct them in a good way. That's Paul concerns. That's all about. That's why Paul exhorts his readers to let it go the bitterness and malice. These kinds of things have no place in the Body of Christ.

Paul says ***"Instead, be kind to one another"***. Simple, isn't it?

And this is how it is in the church or should be. We are family. Over the years, we get to know each other well. We forget that the issues that we fight are never as important as the relationships we share. People are more important than opinions, cultures and human conditions. God love people not what you think.

Paul reminds us to be kind to those we love, to be tender-hearted, and to forgive. It is not simplistic advice; it is a biblical admonition. We are not only brothers and sisters, but we are examples to the world as to how the people of God care for one another. What they see in us will lead them to conclusions about Jesus Christ. *If they see malice, slander and bitterness, they will choose to have no part of the Christian faith, and who can blame them?* **But if they see tolerance, kindness and forgiveness, they will get a glimpse of a God of grace.**

I am so thankful for this congregation - NBLC. In the 5 years and a half that I have been here, we have been trying to be family to one another. We have disagreed, but we have not fought with one another. We have had diverse opinions on many issues, but the sun has never gone down on our anger. We have had tense conversations maybe, but our disagreement and division have not evolved. I thank God for that. And for you. And I pray that this Body of Christ (our families and neighbors around) will continue to be imitators of God, loving and caring for one another so that we can be about his work of loving and caring for others.

So, have you seen any good church fights lately?

Not here. Thanks be to God. Amen.