

There's no conflict like family conflict. I'm sure many of you have experienced the acute pain of family conflict, and all of you have heard painful stories of families that inflicted great suffering on each other, or even tore themselves apart. And plenty of social entities function like families, from congregations to countries. The draw of family is compelling, and most of us count our families among our greatest blessings, but we also know only too well how tragically things can go wrong.

Today's Gospel reflects a family conflict. All the heroes of the Gospel, Jesus, his disciples, friends, family, and allies, all of them were Jewish. The scholarly consensus is that most of the large crowds that sometimes came out to hear him were Jewish, too. But passages like today's depict Jews confronting Jesus, challenging him with skepticism about his claim to divinity, and from that and passages like it, antisemites have claimed that they have Biblical support for their hate and lies. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Antisemitism isn't just evil, it's also stupid and ignorant. First of all, when you read this passage in the original Greek, you read the language of mild disagreement, not contempt or hate. More importantly, scholars are pretty clear that John's Gospel was written in part to respond to a conflict that emerged decades after Jesus's public ministry as the Jesus movement was becoming separate from Judaism. We only have hints of what that separation was like, but clearly, like any family separation, it was painful for all parties concerned. And some of that conflict is projected back into John's account of Jesus's life.

The beauty of these conflict stories is that the people portrayed as challenging Jesus aren't portrayed as wicked, or even foolish, and the questions they ask aren't so different from the ones modern people might ask. "How could Jesus be divine if he was born into a human family just like everyone else?" And while there is a good answer to that question, I find it intriguing that the first thing Jesus says in response is, "Do not complain among yourselves." Perhaps he realized that their question wasn't so much about their doubt of Jesus as it was about their doubt of themselves, or each other.

And indeed, much external conflict is an expression or a working-out of internal trouble. Some people hurt others because they themselves were hurt. Anxious leaders might be driven to demand ever more from their followers, though it never lessens their anxiety. I can even think of some anti-Christian writers who are working out their own conflicted religious feelings and bad religious experiences; it's sadly obvious if you know what to look for. Something along these lines must have been brewing in Ephesus; if everything is healthy you don't need to write something like, "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up."

Like his eminent follower St. Paul, Jesus himself understood the nature of conflict, how complex it can be, and how those who do not understand the conflict they're a part of are best approached with compassion. So the second thing Jesus says in response is, "No one can come to me unless drawn by the Father who sent me."

Although Episcopalians tend not to emphasize dramatic conversion experiences, that saying can still be hard for us to hear. Like everybody else, we like to believe we exercise complete agency over all aspects of our lives. Those of us who came to Anglicanism from protestant traditions were likely drilled with the slogan of salvation by faith alone, and many others have been taught, or at least absorbed the message, that choosing to believe that Jesus is divine both ensures that we will go to heaven when we die and makes us morally upright people.

But God would not make our salvation contingent on something so capricious as our opinions, and faith isn't so simple as intellectual assent. Faith is more than a momentary choice. Faith is a relationship, a bond like the bonds that unite families, and God initiates the relationship. While we might choose to accept or reject a relationship with God, if we find ourselves be united with God, that is because God first offered us union.

Which is why I say that faith is a gift from God. It's a gift we can cultivate and share, and indeed cultivating and sharing our faith is the responsibility of every mature Christian. But while we can celebrate our faith and be grateful for it, and we should pray for God to increase our faith and the faith of others, we should not be prideful about our faith, nor look down on those who are less faithful. In part because we can never be sure how faithful someone really is, and in part because faith is not something we earned or created. Like Jesus himself, faith comes down from heaven.

By the same token, we should cherish the inherent unity of our God-given community. For Christians, getting along is not optional. Yet so many congregations have high levels of conflict. Sometimes conflict amplifies into schism, which is the worst sin, because it is the only way human beings can do harm to God, by damaging Christ's body, the church. So no Christian can say that a schism was God's will.

Sometimes it's unclear who created a family conflict, or who is at fault. Casting blame may be part of the conflict. But Ephesians makes it quite clear that in a Christian community, everyone is responsible for resolving conflict. For God is one. The human and the divine are united in Jesus Christ, and there is also a mystical unity between Christ and his church. So our unity is more important than our pride. Christians by our very nature as people consecrated to God, people who rejoice in being made in the image of God, and people who claim to be the Body of Christ are responsible for upholding our God-given unity.

Which is why I do my best to deal graciously but authentically with people who disagree with me. Right now there are some who would have stronger COVID protocols here, or even cancel church, and others who would have weaker protocols, or even none at all. People feel strongly. I get it. There is no policy the Vestry and I could set that would gain the support of every single parishioner, and yet the line has to be drawn somewhere. Some people aren't going to get their way. But I have to believe that we're going to be OK because we are not united by our opinions or desires, but by the love of

God which is greater than our desires and opinions, and indeed, is so great that it overcomes all things.

God's love certainly overcomes our tendency to elevate our own point of view to a divine commandment, because God's love reveals a reality greater and more gracious than the realities we construct, and seeing even a glimpse of God's reality overwhelms us with gratitude. God's love is the bread of life which comes down from heaven, the bread which we gather to feast upon, bread which sustains us through every challenge and strengthens our unity with God. Thank God there's no love like God's love, no unity like family unity.