

“Will We Approach Division with Care?”

Friends, in person and at a physical distance, we have gathered for worship this morning, coming away from our daily patterns in order to focus energy on praising God, noticing our longings, listening for a fresh Word from God (that is, Love), and responding with our lives. As we enter now into an extended moment of reflection, we will wonder individually and together about how we approach division and conflict.

Let us pray. God of our ancestors, God within each of us and connecting us as community; soften our spirits and open our minds this morning. Lead us toward hearing and responding to your call in each of our lives. As your holy, loving Spirit embraces us in this time and in this space, O God, grant us the serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Moments ago, Kathy read teachings from Jesus in the gospel according to Luke. Earlier in chapter twelve, the writer describes thousands of people gathering in a dense crowd to listen to Jesus. As we hold in our minds that these words were first heard by a multitude of people, gravitationally pulled toward Jesus in their yearning for something new, something more, let's now let his words fall afresh on us. We heard,

“I’ve come to light a fire on the Earth. How I wish the blaze were ignited already!... Do you think I’m here to bring peace on Earth? I tell you, the opposite is true: I’ve come to bring division. From now on a household of five will be divided—three against two and two against three...” (Lk 12: 49, 51-52)

These words from Jesus are disturbing for many of us. It is perhaps slightly easier to swallow the idea that Jesus found purpose in lighting metaphorical fires, which we might interpret as catching people's attention through dramatic and powerful preaching, teaching and healings. But how could it be that Jesus found a sense of purpose in bringing division?

We will return to Jesus' teachings in a moment, gleaning insights from what he goes on to share about seeking clarity and deeper understanding within the midst of conflict and working together toward resolution.

I want to offer (in all honesty) that I was glad to arrive to this gospel lesson for the tenth Sunday after Pentecost in the third of our three-year cycle of Scripture readings. My gladness is two-fold. First, I have a natural appreciation for conflict. When learning about the Enneagram in recent years (a tool I've shared with you that organizes people according to the core needs that drive our behavior), I knew I had landed upon my "type" within the nine types when I read this statement: *"I enjoy getting into arguments – just to see what people are made of."* It's so true (for me). Curiosity and care propel me into an argument and appreciation keeps me in the heat of it. As a middle child, a student leader, an elementary school teacher, a parent and a pastor; I feel as though much of my life has prepared me to accept conflict as natural and to participate in navigating through it.

The second part of my gladness is a reflection of who and how we are as People's Congregational Church. We are a church that has experienced many transitions in the past few years as well as in the past few decades. In my first year and a half as a partner in ministry with all of you, I have found that members and friends are often forthright in expressing their needs and opinions and welcoming of the expressed needs and opinions of others. Division (that is, difference) is natural. Division often leads to an experience of conflict, which can be fruitful if well managed. I sense that our church has both past lived experience and carefully developed cultural norms that lend themselves toward fruitful experiences of conflict.

In 2011, I was introduced to an instrument that has significantly impacted my private life and my work as a pastor. In 1974, Dr. Kenneth W. Thomas and Dr. Ralph H. Kilmann published what is known as the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument.

I will read to you an excerpt from the website for the organization Kilmann Diagnostics. As you listen, I invite you to wonder toward which of five conflict management styles you lean. I also invite you to bring to mind one person with whom you have semi-frequent difference or conflict and who is important in your life (perhaps a family member, a friend, or a neighbor) and wonder toward which which of the five conflict management styles they lean. I quote:

“The Thomas-Kilmann Instrument is designed to measure a person’s behavior in conflict situations. “Conflict situations” are those in which the concerns of two people appear to be incompatible. In such conflict situations, we can describe an individual’s behavior along two dimensions: (1) assertiveness, the extent to which the person attempts to satisfy his own concerns, and (2) cooperativeness, the extent to which the person attempts to satisfy the other person’s concerns. [T]wo underlying dimensions of human behavior (assertiveness and cooperativeness) can then be used to define five different modes for responding to conflict situations:”

[Again, hold yourself lightly in your heart and someone who is close to you with whom you have conflict from time to time. The first style is competing.]

*“**Competing** is assertive and uncooperative—an individual pursues [their] own concerns at the other person’s expense. This is a power-oriented mode in which you use whatever power seems appropriate to win your own position—your ability to argue, your rank, or economic sanctions. Competing means “standing up for your rights,” defending a position which you believe is correct, or simply trying to win.”*

[That is competing. The second style is accommodating.]

*“**Accommodating** is unassertive and cooperative—the complete opposite of competing. When accommodating, the individual neglects [their] own concerns to satisfy the concerns of the other person; there is an element of self-sacrifice in this mode.*

Accommodating might take the form of selfless generosity or charity, obeying another person's order when you would prefer not to, or yielding to another's point of view."

[The third style is avoiding.]

*"**Avoiding** is unassertive and uncooperative—the person neither pursues his own concerns nor those of the other individual. Thus [they] do not deal with the conflict. Avoiding might take the form of diplomatically sidestepping an issue, postponing an issue until a better time, or simply withdrawing from a threatening situation."*

[So we have heard about competing, accommodating and avoiding. The fourth style is collaborating.]

*"**Collaborating** is both assertive and cooperative—the complete opposite of avoiding. Collaborating involves an attempt to work with others to find some solution that fully satisfies their concerns. It means digging into an issue to pinpoint the underlying needs and wants of the two individuals. Collaborating between two persons might take the form of exploring a disagreement to learn from each other's insights or trying to find a creative solution to an interpersonal problem."*

[And finally, the fifth style is compromising.]

*"**Compromising** is moderate in both assertiveness and cooperativeness. The objective is to find some expedient, mutually acceptable solution that partially satisfies both parties. It falls intermediate between competing and accommodating. Compromising gives up more than competing but less than accommodating. Likewise, it addresses an issue more directly than avoiding, but does not explore it in as much depth as collaborating. In some situations, compromising might mean splitting the difference between the two positions, exchanging concessions, or seeking a quick middle-ground solution."*

Friends, I am so grateful for the model of that instrument and the insight it can offer to our lives. We CAN approach division with care, whatever our style in the midst of conflict might be.

Before returning to Jesus' thoughts about conflict, let's hear from the prophet Jeremiah and the Psalmist. Jeremiah wrote (channeling the voice of God),

"I heard what these prophets say—the ones who speak lies in my Name: 'I had a dream!' they say, 'I had a dream!' How long will these lying prophets maintain these fictions in their hearts—these delusions of their own minds?... Let the prophet who has a dream tell it. But let the one who has my word speak it faithfully... Is not my word like fire, says God, and like the hammer that smashes the rock into pieces?" (Jer. 23: 25-29, excerpts)

I think Jeremiah is pointing to a way in which people sometimes talk at each other instead of with each other, declaring their thoughts as if they are already truth (when they would become more fully true only when heard or responded to within community. **I wonder, has anyone ever (like these falsely motivated prophets) spoken at you, and at you and at you? And I wonder, have you ever found yourself speaking at someone, and at them, and at them?** What good we do by speaking more often with one another.

In the fifth verse of the eighty-second Psalm, we heard these words from the heart of God:

*"But you know nothing and you understand nothing—
you walk in darkness,
and the foundations of the Earth are shaking because of your ignorance!"*

I believe that the prophet Jeremiah and the prophet Jesus are leading us to understand that the Earth shakes a little bit each time that a person talks at another, not knowing, not understanding, just continuing to be a bumper boat in the darkness.

Let's return to Jesus' encounter with the crowd. Again, we heard,

"I've come to light a fire on the Earth. How I wish the blaze were ignited already!... Do you think I'm here to bring peace on Earth? I tell you, the opposite is true: I've come to bring division. From now on a household of five will be divided—three against two and two against three..." (Lk 12: 49, 51-52)

Then we heard further,

"Jesus said again to the crowds, 'When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say that rain is coming—and so it does. When the wind blows from the south, you say it's going to be hot—and so it is. You hypocrites! If you can interpret the portents of Earth and sky, why can't you interpret the present time?'" (Lk 12: 54-56)

By this, I take Jesus to be challenging us to interpret not only our surroundings and the ways the environment interacts with us but to be right in the fire of potential division, potential conflict, and fruitful conversations with one another – interpreting the truth we might find in community.

Jesus went on to say, finally,

"Tell me, why don't you judge for yourselves what is just? When you're going with your opponent to appear before a magistrate, try to settle with your antagonist on the way, lest you be turned over to the judge, and the judge deliver you to the bailiff, and the bailiff throw you into prison. I tell you, you won't be released until you've paid your opponent in full—to the last penny." (Lk 12: 57-59)

If anything, Jesus was NOT about control and power over. So he did not desire his community members to need to go before the judge and have their destiny determined by the bailiff. He wished to have us work together in conflict.

So, when you are in conflict; do you compete, accommodate, avoid, collaborate, compromise? Whatever our style in conflict, we CAN approach our divisions with care. Let's do that, because Love is counting on us. Amen!

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People's Congregational Church (Bayport, MN)
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Jeremiah 23:23-32, Psalm 82, Luke 12: 49-59