

A Good Disagreement
Rev. Nicole Farley
First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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Colossians 2:6-19

⁶ As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, ⁷rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

⁸ See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. ⁹For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, ¹⁰and you have come to fullness in him, who is the head of every ruler and authority. ¹¹In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; ¹²when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. ¹³And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, ¹⁴erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. ¹⁵He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

¹⁶ Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. ¹⁷These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. ¹⁸Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, ¹⁹and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.

Pray with me: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, Our Rock and Our Redeemer. Amen.

One of the most common topics I find myself covering in pre-marital meetings with couples is disagreement. To be clear, I'm not talking about claws-out fighting or any other code way of saying an argument. I'm talking about the simple fact that, as two different people, they will not agree on everything. I talk about it because, not uncommonly, one person is often more likely to accede to the other for the sake of making peace. And I talk about it because that person will eventually decide they've had enough of giving in, often

with little warning to the other person. You may know what comes next. It is definitely not what I would consider a “good” disagreement.

Unanimity, in a similar form, has become far more common in groups than it once was. I don’t think this is necessarily because we are more often of like minds now but because discordance is antithetical to what we think getting along looks like and so we remain quiet instead of challenging a different viewpoint. We acquiesce, unhappily in many cases. Paul was writing to the Colossians because they were being swayed by some with differing viewpoints on how to live, and disparaging the ways of Christ in the process. It is for this reason Paul writes “See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.” This was not an area for compromise – they could not substitute Christ. What we’re talking about today are those matters which are far less certain, and also far more prevalent.

The quote from Joan S. Gray this Sunday is “...conflict is normal and, if understood and well-managed, even a beneficial part of church life, one that allows us to clarify our priorities and may even produce better ideas.”¹ Acquiescing for unity, for the sake of agreement, to avoid conflict, to prevent discomfort is not only **not** helpful but it can even be harmful. At the minimum people feel unheard; at worst people go along with something which feels wrong, is wrong, does wrong. This is true for marriages, congregations, friendships – any community built upon relationship.

High school and college debate clubs are vestigial remnants of good disagreements of the kind which stretch back, somewhat ironically, to those very philosophers which Paul abjures. As Gray affirms, such debate, really such an exchange of ideas “allows us to clarify our priorities and may even produce better ideas.” A person’s thoughts were **not** an embodiment of the person having the thoughts. To put one’s thoughts out in the public forum, or even before another person, was not to **risk** a challenge to your very self but simply to **invite** a challenge to your thoughts. And here’s the thing: it is still true that a person’s thoughts are not an embodiment of the person having the thoughts. This matters a

¹ Joan S. Gray, *Spiritual Leadership for Church Officers: A Handbook* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2009); p. 123.

very great deal so I am going to say it again: a person's thoughts are not an embodiment of the person having the thoughts. And so, someone having different thoughts than we do does not place that **person** in opposition to us, just their thoughts. "They" are not against "us."

Philosopher Karl Popper actually said, "I may be wrong and you may be right and, by an effort, we may get nearer the truth."² This quote leads off the page entitled "What Is Debate?" for the International Debate Education Association website. That same page states: "debate embodies the ideals of reasoned argument, tolerance for divergent points of view and rigorous self-examination. Debate is, above all, a way for those who hold opposing views to discuss controversial issues without descending to insult, emotional appeals or personal bias. A key trademark of debate is that it rarely ends in agreement, but rather allows for a robust analysis of the question at hand."³ **This** is good disagreement. And one last quote from the page: "Debate is not a forum for asserting absolute truths, but rather a means of making and evaluating arguments that allows debaters to better understand their own and others' positions."⁴

"Conflict is normal and, if understood and well-managed, even a beneficial part of church life," home life, the life of a community, the life of a nation. We bring our best ideas and, sometimes, our best ideas are **the** best ideas. Far more often we join our best ideas with the ideas of others and **then** comes the best idea. This is the very premise of our denomination and, even more so, of our faith. In Numbers we read how leadership was shared among Moses and seventy elders. In Acts we read about the apostles and the elders making decisions together. Jesus says in Matthew 18 "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." We are a people of community. That means we are diverse, we are different, we do not think the same. And we are not community despite our diversity, our differences, our varying thoughts – we are community **with** diversity and difference. Many members, one body. Not all feet, not all hands, not all ears, not all eyes.

² <http://www.ippf.idebate.org/about/debate/what>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

When we work in communion, bringing what is distinctly each of ours together, **then** comes the best idea.

Let me say again: a person's thoughts are not an embodiment of the person having the thoughts. This is as important in times without disagreement as it is in times of disagreement. And hear this, too – disagreement is not a dirty word. We may not be disagreeing about anything right now as a church but big opportunities, as much as big challenges, **need** disagreement for that “best idea” to come about. Maybe you're disagreeing at home or at work or with friends. We're **certainly** disagreeing as a nation. Disagreement itself is normal, natural, and necessary. Good disagreement works toward the best idea, what Popper would call the truth. Unhealthy disagreement does not see a person's thoughts separate from the person. Good disagreement is “a way for those who hold opposing views to discuss controversial issues without descending to insult, emotional appeals or personal bias.”⁵ Unhealthy disagreement, well, you know.

Like many things I speak of from this place, good disagreement is not naturally easy, certainly not in these times, not like it might have once been. But if we are following Christ in working for the best for all, then we must not acquiesce, we must face conflict, we must let go of comfort for what is more important. We must listen and we must share. We are called to be one body. For that best, be brave with me and strengthen me with your bravery, will you?

Let us pray: Make us, together, your best, we pray, our one, holy, and triune God. Amen.

⁵ <http://www.ippf.idebate.org/about/debate/what>