

WHEN CONFLICT COMES, LET GO FOR DEAR LIFE

Preached by Seth Robinson at Hope Central Church

Pentecost 3 | 25 June 2017

Psalm 69:7-18 | Matthew 10:27-39

This is one tough Gospel passage. And I'll be honest. Rather than wrestling with what Jesus means when he demands we *take* up our cross and follow him (Matt 10:38), part of me would much rather be *taking* a stroll in the Arboretum. And instead of coming to terms with Jesus' suggestion that following him will sow division in my family (Matt 10:35-36), the only division I wish I had on this morning's docket is dividing up a quiche into even-sized pieces at brunch. You see, I'm a minimizer—that's my conflict style: I avoid tension and conflict like the plague. Maybe your style when you meet conflict is different. Maybe you're over here feeling big feelings about Jesus saying he's coming to bring not peace but a sword. Maybe you're trying to break it all down into logical parts: "So, how many sparrows am I worth, exactly?"

But I'm getting ahead of myself. We'll come back to these honest-to-God responses to conflict. First, please, will you pray with me? *O God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts together, be acceptable and pleasing to you in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.*

One time, when was maybe six years old, my parents decided that they would stop taking me to the dentist I'd been going to. You see, after comparing notes with the parents of some of my schoolmates, my parents had discovered that my dentist—I'll call him Dr. Brian—had been overcharging them for my cleanings and pressuring them to sign off on all sorts of expensive and unnecessary procedures. Now, under the circumstances, you would *think* that dropping Dr. Brian would have been a "good-riddance" kind of situation. Easy enough, right? Yet I saw the anxiety that this confrontation brought up for my parents. I clearly remember listening as my dad called up Dr. Brian and said, "Hi, Dr. Brian. We wanted to let you know that Seth will no longer be your patient because..."—wait for it—"our family is moving to Wisconsin!" My six-year-old heart did a somersault in my chest. What? We're moving to some mythical place I'd never heard of called "Wisconsin"?! My parents later assured me that, no, I didn't need to pack my Jurassic Park-themed backpack with all my earthly belongings. We were *not* moving to Wisconsin. It was just easier to tell Dr. Brian that. You see, we didn't want to hurt his feelings or cause a stir.

If the prospect of asserting their prerogative to a crooked children's dentist could cause my parents this much anxiety, you can probably imagine the aversion to conflict that reigned supreme in my house growing up. The strategy of minimizing disharmony was one I came by honestly, and so did my parents. My mom and my dad had learned themselves growing up that anger is a feeling that is necessarily destructive or at the very least unproductive and discrediting.

Now, I was adaptable and resourceful, as kids tend to be, and I figured out pretty quickly what I needed to do to get by in my home environment. I also formed beliefs that

made meaning of that environment—including beliefs about God. By living with affectionate parents who nevertheless swallowed anger like spoonfuls of cough syrup, I gradually internalized the belief that the supreme power in my life—God—loved me, yes, but that God loved me *provided* that I gave God no cause for anger or disappointment. Pastoral counselor Merle Jordan calls this internalized authority image a “household god” with a lowercase “g”—an idol, a false power that masquerades as the True God in our psyches growing up.¹

My household god seemed to speak, ventriloquist style, through the mouth of the True God, with all God’s authority. He—and it was always a *he*—told me that if I wasn’t perfect in my roles as student and mediator of family conflict I would face the unthinkable: God’s judgment and his swift abandonment. Better, then, not to put the Lord my God to the test, I figured. Better not to assert myself, but instead to sacrifice parts of myself that might displease my parents, lest I trigger their anger and they, too, cut me off. So I developed a finely tuned emotional barometer that could detect fields of pressure and tension in my home. And my eyes scanned the horizon continually, alert for any signs of conflict that would shatter this false peace.

I believe we all have our household gods. Maybe yours have a different personality from mine. Maybe yours smothered you with love, seldom giving you the space to forge a separate identity. Maybe your household god sent down thunderbolts without warning, and you walked on eggshells because you never knew when the next one would strike, and you had to protect yourself. Or maybe your household god blew in and blew out and left you confused, with a gaping sense of absence much of the time. No matter what this false authority was like for us, chances are we learned to cope with it. We learned what “works” so we could survive in our homes, so we could grasp after some kind of wholeness, some kind of salvation. And many of us have carried into our adult lives those *same* “defensive strategies of salvation.”² And, naturally, we hold onto them. We hold onto them for dear life.

Naturally. Because as adults we come face to face with the full brunt of empire. We are told in various ways, depending on our social location, that we are inadequate, that we are worthless, that our lives don’t matter—unless, maybe, we behave in such-and-such a way, attain such-and-such an accolade, become more-*such-and-such* a person. And so we try to numb out and lash out and figure out our dehumanization. Naturally. How, in all this, could we *not* fall back on our tried-and-true strategies for dealing with conflict and adversity?

But—and here’s where the good news begins—there is a voice in the wilderness of you and of me. It is the voice of God within us, crying out for health and wholeness—*true* wholeness—and peace—*true* peace. We practice listening to that divine voice within us, and to its echoes among us, when we gather in worship and pray for each other throughout the week.

¹ Merle Jordan, *Reclaiming Your Story: Family History and Spiritual Growth* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999).

² A phrase I borrow from Jordan.

When we confess the sins of our communities together in worship, we practice counting the cost of these systems—systems of domination that separate us from ourselves, from one another, and from God. Together, we lament that these systems have obscured and silenced the truths of an Unconditionally Loving God, all to amplify the lies of our conditionally loving idols.

And when we come, in worship, to hear the word of God in scripture as Beth read it for us today, we are invited to turn down the volume on the voice of our household god and to listen to the still, small voice of Love that is the True God, who has been trying to reach us all along. We are invited to hear God’s voice in the words attributed to Jesus, who came to dismantle the death-dealing systems of oppression of his day. Jesus, who called out the demons and demonstrated against the temples that the Roman Empire deployed to honor the household gods in *its* pantheon. Jesus, who came to “bring good news to the poor,” “to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind,” “to let the oppressed go free” (Lk 4:18-19) and to “bind up the brokenhearted” (Isa 61:1). Jesus, who summons us today out of separation and into community.

Yeah, it’s a tough passage, today’s Gospel. There are plenty of trigger words that may amp up the ventriloquism of our household gods, who are no doubt holding on for dear life. When Jesus says “whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me” (Matt 10:38), I know I’m often distracted by *my* false god. He uses these words to justify my self-sacrifice, persuading me that I need to earn my way to worthiness, to salvation, by conforming to the will of others. Folks who’ve experienced intimate partner violence have borne witness to the deceit of those internalized idols who may contort this into a passage that justifies remaining in abusive situations—as if God didn’t will their safety or affirm their right to exist. There’s a lot of noise here. So many lies our household gods tell us.

Thanks be to the *True* God, though, because ours is a God who desires mercy, not sacrifice—amen? Jesus is after something bigger than legislating the behavior of individuals—an idea that wouldn’t even have made sense in first-century Palestine, within a Jewish understanding of human beings as collectives, as multitudes. No, Jesus is disrupting the kinship ties that made those collectives limiting, the ties that demanded uniformity one generation to the next. For the disciples in their mission to all peoples, following Jesus’ way of love and justice will, in effect, sever the ties that constrict them, loose the bonds that narrow the possibilities for connection beyond clan or tribe. Jesus envisions a new family. In time, in the shadow of his cross there will emerge a new community, one that forges unity in solidarity against all forces that victimize and dehumanize.

Jesus’ new unity brings with it a new political identity. Disciples will claim and be claimed by their identity as citizens of God’s realm, members of the body of Christ. We can see our spiritual ancestors in the early church embodying this identity in a culture of male-dominated, slave-owning households. Sometimes our early Christian siblings

chafed against and even actively reconfigured those households into spaces that were more equitable and hospitable.

Some of us know a little, maybe a lot, about what that's like. Some of us here have made decisions about who we are and whom we love and what we refuse to accept and how we will create new chosen families, new intentional communities. Some of us have destabilized empire from the inside out, by exposing how it holds on for dear life to norms that do not reflect our gloriousness as beloved children of God. Some of us have been registered in our resistance as a political threat; some know all too well the risk, conflict, and adversity Jesus is talking about here. Some of us know it intimately, as a pain and a sorrow that is almost beyond naming.

If we are to be worthy of Jesus, that is, if we are to live into the way of being human that Jesus shows us is possible, then we'll need to get real—together—about what happens when we and our siblings in Christ threaten empire.

When that happens—when we face conflict and adversity for love's sake—it's all too easy for us to fall back on our defensive strategies for salvation, those tactics we employed to deal with conflict in our formative years. Based on what I've been learning about this topic from personality studies like the Enneagram, I believe there are at least three major approaches to handling conflict in situations where our needs aren't getting met.³ We might use all three approaches, though many of us probably have a go-to among the three.

We minimize conflict. We catastrophize conflict. We analyze conflict.

If you're a minimizer, like me, you tend to be generally optimistic and to deny or avoid the problem, often distracting yourself with something else. Minimizers want to feel good and want others to feel good. "Problem? What problem?" a minimizer might ponder. "This isn't such a big deal."

If you're a catastrophizer, you may tend to feel the emotional "realness" of a problem and may have a hard time containing your feelings. You may react emotionally and monitor how others respond to you, waiting to see whether you can trust them. When catastrophizing, you may find yourself saying, "This is terrible. What are we going to do!" or "I'm ticked off and you should be, too. Why aren't you more upset about this?"

If you're an analyzer, you may fall back on your competency, convinced there's a logical solution—so long as all parties work together dispassionately to find the most efficient and practical method. You might be analyzing if you say something like, "OK, we're all adults here; let's solve this problem. Get out the clipboard and checklist. Let's

³ My descriptions of the following three conflict styles are adapted from material on the Enneagram's Harmonic Groups—the Positive Outlook group ("Minimizers": types 2, 7, and 9); the Reactive group ("Catastrophizers": types 4, 6, and 8); and the Competency group ("Analyzers": types 1, 3, and 5). See Don Richard Riso and Ross Hudson, *The Wisdom of the Enneagram: The Complete Guide to Psychological and Spiritual Growth for the Nine Personality Types* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999), 64-68; Rob Fitzel, "The Harmonic Approaches," *The Enneagram*, <http://www.fitzel.ca/enneagram/harmonics.html>.

start a Google Doc!”

These strategies of salvation in times of conflict—minimizing, catastrophizing, and analyzing—all have their payoffs. That’s part of why we hold onto them for dear life. Each strategy offers gifts to the body of Christ—whether by reminding us of the bigger picture, or attuning us to the emotional work to be done, or prompting us to trust our skills and work within our capacities. Yet, Jesus points out that these strategies can get in our way. And they get in our way, especially, when we delude ourselves into believing the lie that we *ourselves* can self-atone for our inadequacies, that we can secure our own salvation, our wholeness, our being at one with the world.⁴

When our preferred conflict strategies get in our way, when they are no longer upholding our dignity or serving the work of love and justice, Jesus urges us to thank them...and to surrender them. Trusty sidekicks though these strategies may be, Jesus calls us to let go. To let go for dear life.⁵

We must be willing to give up the familiar life we know if we are to find the more-abundant life we can only begin to imagine.

It may be our work to let go of a life untroubled, a life that nurses a false peace. Jesus reminds us that healing through conflict requires truth-telling—on earth as it is in heaven (Matt 10:32-33). No disciple can ignore or downplay the damage that justice has wreaked on all of us—no justice, no peace. We must proclaim our truths from the rooftops (Matt 10:27).

It may be our work to let go of a life that offers up a rational, 5-step, 30-day plan for every challenge. Jesus calls us to embrace the ambiguity and mystery of Holy Saturday, the time between death and new life. We must grieve our attachments to the existing system, however inhumane it was, before co-creating new ways of being and doing

It may be our work to let go of a life in which our feelings overwhelm us, a life wracked by mistrust or misplaced trust. Jesus calls us to trust the True God and to not push God away, even if we feel anger. *Especially* if we feel anger. Even anger with God. It’s possible to grieve and to find a middle ground between violent hatred and apathetic withdrawal. We can be a gentle, angry people, singing for our lives, and letting go. Letting go for dear life.

Surrender can be downright terrifying. I mean, it’s our *lives* we’re talking about here. We’re being called to depose the worn, predictable idols we’ve been listening to for years. We’re being called to admit the ultimate insufficiency of whatever hard-won security, esteem, and power we’ve cobbled together for ourselves.

⁴ This is one of the two idolatries Jordan identifies—the other being obedience to our household gods.

⁵ I’m indebted to the late Rev. Forrest Church for this phrase.

As I wrap up, I'd like to share with you a story about what surrender looks like with dear life on the line. I heard this story from Alexia Salvatierra, a Lutheran pastor and organizer:

In the late 1980's "Bishop Desmond Tutu was told by the government to stop speaking out against apartheid," the system of institutionalized racism in South Africa. "One Easter morning soldiers were sent to his church. They lined the walls of the sanctuary holding loaded rifles. The congregation was frightened that Bishop Tutu would speak against apartheid and that the soldiers would start shooting. They were also frightened that he would not speak—for then the regime would have effectively won.

"Bishop Tutu began bouncing on his heels and laughing, laughing uproariously, laughing like a child. The laughter was contagious. Soon everyone was laughing, even some of the soldiers. In the midst of the laughter, Bishop Tutu cried out to the soldiers, 'Little Brothers, you know that God is a God of justice, the God of the Exodus. You know that we are going to win. We don't want you to miss out on one moment of the celebration. Join us now! The party wouldn't be complete without you.' Bishop Tutu went on to preach against apartheid" and no one was shot that day.⁶

Bishop Tutu tells the truth. He honors mystery amid seeming terror. He trusts God to hold him and his people as they let the wisdom of their feelings speak—their joy and their hope as well as their pain and their fear. Together, they made a way out of no way. And they disarmed the agents of empire and converted them into the newest beloved, indispensable members of the Body of Christ.

The good news is that, though God longs for us to let go, God doesn't let us go it alone. We have Jesus to guide us as a community as we practice naming and disclaiming the crosses that set us at odds with empire and with our cherished household gods. Jesus is with us, showing us the way, revealing to us what God's dream of justice is like. And we have each other, with all the resources that our stories and strategies offer for our shared work, our shared play in the world.

Beloved, I pray we may trust that God *is* with us in the thick of conflict. I pray God's still, small voice may drown out the ventriloquism of our household gods. I pray we listen as God whispers into our ears, saying, "You. My beloved! Let go, dear one, for all that in good in you. Let go, because *I* am good. Let go—because I am your God." *Amen.*

⁶ I heard this story during a workshop with Rev. Alexia Salvatierra. The text here is taken from her book, Alexia Salvatierra and Peter Heltzel, *Faith-Rooted Organizing: Mobilizing the Church in Service to the World* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 75.