

Message: “Conflict and Faith”

Imagine a master carpenter who ran a workshop for forty years. Every tool has its exact place. And every piece of furniture is built according to time-tested methods. One day, his daughter, who has just graduated with a degree in modern design and sustainable architecture, takes over the business. She walks into the shop and begins rearranging the layout to make it safer, bringing in new eco-friendly materials and using digital blueprints.

The old carpenter stands in the doorway with crossed arms. He doesn't look at the beautiful new designs. He doesn't notice how excited the new clients are. Instead, he walks up to her and asks, *“Who gave you permission to move my workbench? Who gave you the right to change the way we do things here?”*

He isn't upset because her methods are bad. He's upset because his sense of control has been disrupted. Like those who confronted Moses and Jesus, it's so easy for us to mistake our comfort with the *old way* of doing things as the *only way* God can work.

Our Scripture passages today drop us right into the middle of two high-stakes standoffs. The first is a dry, dusty wilderness outpost called Rephidim, where a parched, terrified group corners Moses, demanding water. The second is the courtyard of the temple in Jerusalem, where religious and civilian leaders corner a young rabbi from Nazareth, demanding credentials.

These are both cases of spiritual amnesia. Spiritual amnesia is a condition where a person forgets God's past goodness, their spiritual identity and God's promises during times of comfort or trouble. It's usually caused by injury, shock, fatigue, repression or illness.

The result: we stop growing or finding joy in the Lord. We become depressed, discouraged and what some might call “miserable Christians.”

We become spiritually paralyzed, forgetting about God's promises to forgive. And we become so focused on wrongdoing we lose sight of the Savior who is right before us. We can't see the way forward, so we grumble, quarrel and complain.

That's exactly what happened to Moses. He was put "on the spot." The newly liberated Israelites were traveling through the desert wilderness as God planned, one leg of the journey at a time. And then they found themselves in a place with no water. And their scarcity mindset took over.

Panic set in. Their anxiety caused spiritual amnesia. They forgot the parting of the Red Sea a few months earlier. They forgot the manna falling from heaven each day. They forgot everything God was doing for them.

And so, they put Moses on trial. The Hebrew word translated as "quarreling" implies a legal complaint or a lawsuit. In effect, they challenged his leadership, credentials and purpose. *"Did you just bring us out here to die of thirst?"*

What they're really asking: "Is the Lord even here?"

When times are difficult and our belt tight, scarcity and fear often take over, leading us to assume God has abandoned us. When this happens, the next step is to blame someone, like our leaders.

Fast forward to the temple. Jesus has just entered Jerusalem to the sound of shouting crowds and waving palm branches. He overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple and healed the blind and the lame, making it a place of worship, prayer and healing. This also completely disrupted the old religious and economic systems.

And now, as he stands in the temple teaching, the establishment decides they've had enough. The chief priests and elders of the people, in other words the religious and civil authorities, confront him. They don't ask him about what he's teaching. They don't ask about the people who were healed. Instead, they ask a question about control: *"Who gave you permission to do these things?"*

They're focused on scarcity, just like the Israelites in the desert. So, the leaders ask for credentials. They want to know why Jesus thinks he has the right to disrupt their systems, change their routines and challenge their institutional security.

Jesus spoke to power and they didn't like it. And so, the conflict which was at a simmer gets turned up to a full boil. The gloves come off.

They're going to act as they see fit. They can't see how the adversary is using them and their spiritual weakness. Four days later, Jesus is crucified because of their lack of faith and trust. Yet, Calvary turns everything upside down through forgiveness and reconciliation.

Conflict isn't new to the human experience, and it's certainly not new to the church. In our United Methodist tradition, we often find ourselves wrestling with structures, rules and varying interpretations of how we are to live out our mission in the world. Like the chief priests and elders, our natural human instinct when things feel uncertain or changing is to protect what we know. We want to check credentials, too. We want to demand, "Who gave you the permission to change things?"

But there's a difference between human power and divine authority. Without grumbling, God brings water out of solid rock, something Moses would never be able to do. Jesus changes the world with love, which lies at the root of God's power. True spiritual authority doesn't seek to dominate. It heals, liberates and restores.

When conflict arises, our faith calls us to examine where we stand. Are we protecting our own personal comfort and power, or do we trust our Creator and Sustainer, and the transformative love of Jesus?

Have you ever noticed how Jesus asks a question in response to a question? He knows the leaders are politically minded, focused on influence and control. So, he turns things around with an odd question about John the Baptist, "*Did he have permission to baptize?*"

Jesus knew the leaders were there, cheering John on. They wanted revival, people returning to the temple. Matthew tells us the leaders huddled together and realized no matter how they answered, they'd lose face or control. If they embraced John, they'd have to embrace Jesus. They'd have to acknowledge Jesus, too. So, they chose safety over truth, offering a tentative, "*We don't know.*"

Sometimes, when we face conflict within our families, workplaces or churches, we're the same. We become so afraid of losing an argument, losing face or losing control we refuse to engage in honest, vulnerable conversation. We protect ourselves with defensive walls instead of opening our hearts to what God might be doing during the tension.

Faith doesn't mean having absolute certainty or winning every disagreement. Faith means trusting God is present even in the messy, uncomfortable spaces of conflict. It means having the humility to say, "I may not have the answer, but I trust Christ is at work here."

John Wesley was an advocate for "catholic spirit" or universal love. While we may not all think alike, we can all love alike.

When we experience conflict, faith and love invites us to shift our focus away from demanding our own way and toward asking where God's grace is breaking through.

The chief priests and elders left without an answer because they were more invested in their own authority than in God's kin-dom. I hope we don't make the same mistake. I hope we can be open to change without fear.

For example, think of a church council or a family facing an unexpected shortfall. The initial response is almost always anxiety. We gather in our conference room or living room, look at the numbers and invariably the temperature rises.

We start to point fingers: "Who chose this?" "Why did we do that?" In times of scarcity, we may sound like those in the desert. When our emotional resources are depleted, we can experience spiritual amnesia. We forget every miracle, every surprise donation, and every moment of healing which brought us to this point. We may demand to check the credentials of anyone suggesting a new direction.

But God's authority doesn't operate on numbers or logic.

God doesn't balance the books the way we expect. Jesus changes the landscape entirely. When conflict hits, our job isn't to build a fortress around our dwindling resources or demand total control. We are to walk by faith, leaning on the One who meets our struggles with radical grace.

To help us on this way, Jesus tells a parable about two children who have a significant disconnect between words and deeds. One promises good things but doesn't do them - they represent the church and business people. The second wouldn't promise but does good things after all - they represent the people of the street, immigrants and the needy.

Jesus asked, “Which do you prefer?” And everyone said,
“We want those who do good things.”

Notice: Jesus didn’t ask which was better, who was more holy.

And by doing so, he emphasized what God wants: for us to do the right thing, the loving thing, the justice-making thing. God wants those who will get their hands dirty, those who build community, those who foster relationships, and who mentor the ones who come alongside. I also think this means both children, and those whom they represent, are loved and redeemable in Jesus’ eyes, if we’re willing to trust him.

Jesus wants our words and promises to match what we do.

In the long haul of this faith journey, we’re moving toward moments when our lives are whole. Where what you see is what you get. And the more good we do, the more perfectly we love, as Jesus loves.

God’s amazing grace provides, sustains and walks with us, even when we go off track, or when the winds of conflict blow through our lives and community. Let’s anchor ourselves in Christ who leads the way with humble mercy, unconditional love and radical grace.

Alleluia! Thanks be to God.

Let us pray ...

Exodus 17:1-7 (CEB)

The whole Israelite community broke camp and set out from the Sin desert to continue their journey, as the Lord commanded. They set up their camp at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. The people argued with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.”

Moses said to them, “Why are you arguing with me? Why are you testing the Lord?”

But the people were very thirsty for water there, and they complained to Moses, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us, our children, and our livestock with thirst?”

So Moses cried out to the Lord, “What should I do with this people? They are getting ready to stone me.”

The Lord said to Moses, “Go on ahead of the people, and take some of Israel’s elders with you. Take in your hand the shepherd’s rod that you used to strike the Nile River, and go. I’ll be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Hit the rock. Water will come out of it, and the people will be able to drink.” Moses did so while Israel’s elders watched. He called the place Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites argued with and tested the Lord, asking, “Is the Lord really with us or not?”

Matthew 21:23-32 (CEB)

When Jesus entered the temple, the chief priests and elders of the people came to him as he was teaching. They asked, “What kind of authority do you have for doing these things? Who gave you this authority?”

Jesus replied, “I have a question for you. If you tell me the answer, I’ll tell you what kind of authority I have to do these things. Where did John get his authority to baptize? Did he get it from heaven or from humans?”

They argued among themselves, “If we say ‘from heaven,’ he’ll say to us, ‘Then why didn’t you believe him?’ But we can’t say ‘from humans’ because we’re afraid of the crowd, since everyone thinks John was a prophet.” Then they replied, “We don’t know.”

Jesus also said to them, “Neither will I tell you what kind of authority I have to do these things.

“What do you think? A man had two sons. Now he came to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’

“‘No, I don’t want to,’ he replied. But later he changed his mind and went.

“The father said the same thing to the other son, who replied, ‘Yes, sir.’ But he didn’t go.

“Which one of these two did his father’s will?”

They said, “The first one.”

Jesus said to them, “I assure you that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering God’s kingdom ahead of you. For John came to you on the righteous road, and you didn’t believe him. But tax collectors and prostitutes believed him. Yet even after you saw this, you didn’t change your hearts and lives and you didn’t believe him.”