

It seems silly to ask which is preferable, conflict or peace? All prefer peace, right? Yet, why then is conflict so often the choice and reality of our world? Whether global strife, families struggling with divorce, children alienated from parents, political battles, community turf wars, bitter words, raised fist, or loud voices, everywhere we look, conflict rather than peace is all too often the norm.

So, is peace simply the absence of conflict, or does it take an effort to make it happen? Is conflict the reality of peace being rejected, or is it even more sinister than that?

We are told to stand up to bullies. Bullies are conditioned to assume conflict is the answer to every selfish need. Peacemakers are often seen as idealistic weaklings, while those who bring conflict are not always the initiators. So, what is one to do when making peace seem so complicated and elusive?

In the beginning, God created a world of peace. He walked side by side with Adam and Eve in the garden. There was nothing needed which was not already a gift. But doubt was placed in their minds that God was somehow holding back, hiding more goodies. And the seeds of conflict were planted. The beginning of a rebellion was encouraged. And life has never been the same!

Jesus' words today are focused on the incredibly important effort of ending conflict among people who know they are in a relationship created by God. This is crucial, for if we cannot be at peace with those who share the same values and vision, there can be no hope for peace with those who are different. And if we can learn to be at peace, despite our differences with those we love, we can begin to learn why it is even more important to create peace with enemies and those with a different point of view.

Conflict is the painful reality of the tension created by what we call sin. Conflict is the wall of separation that keeps us from God and each other. It is like a moat that is created to protect "my castle" from those I don't want to let in, or those I don't want to go out and meet. Conflict is the result of selfishness (the root of all sin.) It is caused by being convinced I am more important than you, my needs have more value than yours, and my goals must be respected no matter what the cost is to you.

The pain of such conflict is real. And it doesn't matter who builds the wall that separates. Pointing fingers never ends conflict, but continues the attack caused by my need to protect and lift up "me." What is obvious to any is that conflict prevents peace, and as long as we need to keep protecting ourselves or punish others for what they have done, there can never be peace.

The reality of conflict is that it returns lives to the void of pre-creation. If you remember the first words of Genesis, you will understand. "*In the beginning the earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep.*" Those are the first words of Scripture, but have you ever thought about what they mean?

Before God acted, there was only chaos, separation, darkness, and emptiness. It was the worst conflict of all, a complete separation and lack of any purpose, harmony, or peace. When God acted, in the miracle of creation, a plan was put in place, chaos was left behind, and a kingdom of harmonious peace was established. Yet, Adam and Eve decided (upon bad advice) that they could somehow put their mark on God's plan and in the process, destroyed peace and usher

conflict into our vocabulary. And the world has never been the same, and peace has never been completely embraced.

But then, the love of our Creator God entered into our conflict by taking on our flesh as a helpless baby and grew to destroy the conflict of sin and death with his new creation. In the example of his life, he revealed a selfless, servant lifestyle that shows what true love and peace can accomplish and maintain.

Jesus' entire ministry was to enter a conflicted world of walls and anger and lashing out at one another seeing to build bridges where they have been torn down and tear down walls that had been built up. He came to undo the confusion of Babel, the destruction in which no one wanted or was able to understand each other due to sin. Instead by the power of his Holy Spirit, the breath of creation, he bridged the angry barriers of sin gap so that each (in their own language) now could hear the same message and learn to live with the same love. He brought peace so that we might learn to live in peace.

In the Gospel today, Jesus starts with people who already are in relationship with each other and gives a pathway to end conflict and restore peace. First reach out to each other, change your fists into open arms and your hardened hearts into a loving embrace. And if you need help, let another member of the family show you the way. It is all about ending the fear of selfishness and fearing that we might fail, and instead understanding that we have been created to help and lift up each other so that each can feel loved and each has the help they need to be successful in our family adventure.

The goal in such encounter is for each to realize their brokenness is part of the conflict, and that Christ's forgiveness for us is a gift now that we can use with each other. Say "I am sorry" and mean it. Reach out and say, "I forgive" and mean it. Accept the forgiveness of the other and celebrate it. And feel how good it is to have that terrible conflicted past be a thing of the past so that life can now move forward.

That is precisely with Jesus did as we wrestled on the cross, accepting the pain of our loss and the devastation of our conflict called sin and death. He buried them in the darkness of a tomb and left them behind as he emerged fresh and clean and alive, just as we are called to do when we put the conflict behind us and live as Easter people.

Sounds good! Right? But there is more as Jesus then adds the most radical part of the instructions. What does he say to those who are in the community and refuse to live with forgiveness and peace? He says, "*Treat them like tax collectors and sinners!*" Now at first blush that sounds harsh, like a rejection or an attack or shunning a sinner." Until we remember how Jesus treated outsiders and sinners! What followed was the most radical act ever witnessed, for what Jesus did was treat outsiders like insiders and sinners like everyone else. He touched their uncleanness. He invited them to meals. He healed their brokenness. And, as people who had been restored to the family, he called them to go and do for others what he had done for them. This is his Cycle of Life!

So, here is the bottom line: We are good at conflict and weak making peace. And we can't change the world! But god has! He restores what we cannot and ends the conflicts we keep stirring up. He brings peace and his call is for us to respond by reaching out and living in that same peace.

Let us seek never to begin conflict or lift up walls. In such a powerful first encounter, God's powerful love will become part of our living. It begins one on one, and then by twos, so that eventually all will feel the love of a new creation. All God asks is that you accept the peace this gift brings, and daily share in the joyful burden of his love!

Because we know who we are, we should know how to act! And if we won't, it isn't God that is glorified but our weakness that is being revealed.

Think about it daily and often, and especially before you react. God has done so much for us, this is the least we can do for Him. And even better than that, it works!