

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC
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26th Sunday of Year A Mt 21:28-32

For many Christians conflict is something to be avoided at all costs, something that appears to be at odds with all the words of Jesus about love, forgiveness, acceptance. A Christian is someone, they say, who tries to get along with everybody, so there is no place in his or her behavior for arguing, for disagreement, or for any kind of unpleasantness. But just how realistic is that kind of attitude? Can we expect that even people who genuinely care about each other, or people who work together to pursue a common goal, or even people with a generally positive attitude, will never rub against each other the wrong way, or will never disagree on how to deal with some issue? Christianity can't be reduced to a smiling happy face wishing everyone a nice day. Life is more complicated than the sentiments expressed on a Hallmark greeting card. So, the question is what do we do when those darker emotions inevitably surface, when human beings interact with each other and angry feelings interfere with getting the job done? Do we suppress them; do we deny they even exist; do we just try to ignore our resentments, hoping that they'll go away in time?

Today's Gospel challenges us to reflect on how we deal with conflict in our lives. Is conflict just something to be avoided, or does it have even a positive role to play? Can it be seen as a means to an end, a necessary means whereby everyone's thoughts, feelings, opinions on some matter are expressed freely and honestly, so that in the end with negotiation, mutual respect and a spirit of compromise, a fruitful course of action acceptable to all can be taken up? In the short parable of today's Gospel, Jesus contrasts the response of two individuals, two sons, to an unpleasant task. One son who initially protests and refuses, but eventually does what his father asks, and the other who says he is willing to comply with his father's request, but actually does not. The implication appears to be that the first son, despite his back talk, is the better of the two, because in the end it's actions that speak louder than words. What we might reflect upon today are the ways in which we tend to act like that second son—how we say all the right words, send all the right signals, but when “push comes to shove,” the job just never gets done.

Let's look at the second son first. He appears as the “good son” because outwardly he is compliant, respectful and obedient, but ultimately his will is made of steel in refusing to do what his father requests. That son exhibits the kind of behavior that today we might call “passive-aggressive.” It is an apparent contradiction in terms but an accurate enough description of the kind of individual who seems to say all the

right words, give all the signs and signals that he or she is willing to cooperate to get the job done, but then never delivers, nothing happens, nothing changes. The passive-aggressive may appear affable, friendly and agreeable as everyone is discussing what has to be done, because it is "peace at any price" that he or she desires most of all. But when the chips are down and it comes time to deliver the goods, when the passive-aggressive has to do something that he or she really doesn't want to do, then often they stall, they sabotage, they undermine, they give less than their best effort. And when their backs are up against the wall, they use what power or influence they have to block any change in the status quo—despite all the smiles, they are going to have their way, no matter what.

This kind of behavior inevitably causes confusion and frustration for those who live and work with such people, since what was supposedly promised never comes to pass, but the passive-aggressive's defense may be to present a face of total innocence, a look of incomprehension as why others are upset, or to hide behind a wall of protective silence. Those who have to bear the consequences of the passive-aggressive's actions or inaction may even end up feeling guilty. Here, they're angry with this person everyone thinks of as a "saint," so, it must be their fault. It couldn't be the "saint's" because everyone knows how good he or she is. What they don't know or realize is how well the passive-aggressive "saint" has been subtly manipulating the situation. The passive-aggressive may try to sidestep unpleasant issues or ignore problems that are probably their concern, but when someone else assumes responsibility by default and resolves it in a way they don't approve of, then our friend, the passive-aggressive, reacts with a fit of pique or annoyance.

I mention this because this trait of passive-aggressiveness is one particularly susceptible to religious people who think that because their outward demeanor is so Christ-like, they are doing all that is required of them. They fail to see that their refusal to deal with the issue at hand, their unwillingness to take seriously the differences of those around him, are all negative forms of aggression, resistance, and the deliberate withholding of themselves from engaging others honestly.

As we read the pages of the Gospels, we see that Jesus was no stranger to conflict. He went to zip and when to zap; He knew when to speak words of consolation, but certainly in His confrontations with the scribes and Pharisees, He did not mince words either. In the parable of today's Gospel, the first son is apparently in conflict with his father, but eventually does with his father asks of him. The harsh words that he speaks can be seen as a stage leading to his eventual compliance. This might help us see that ultimately conflict can be directed toward a constructive

reconciling of the disruptive and divisive forces that are an inevitable part of all human interactions. Conflict can be a process, a means to an end. The ultimate goal can include a reconciliation and a meeting of the minds, but one doesn't get there easily. From the pain, suffering, the hard work of negotiating differences, from the honest communication of ideas and feelings, comes finally the resolution of conflict.

Even between people who love each other deeply, there will arise conflicts. But if they are going to fight, they should fight fair, focusing on the issue at hand and not dredging up irrelevant incidents from the past, taking responsibility for their own thoughts and feelings, and not speaking in an accusatory fashion. For people working together in small groups, it will take some time before they learn to work together. They have to go through several stages, whereby they adjust themselves to each other's style of operation. It's been said of small groups that before they work effectively, they must first form, storm and then perform. Each of us has to be aware of our own passive-aggressive tendencies, where our unwillingness to rock the boat, coupled with certain resentments, may foster in us a habit of giving less than our best effort, of minimal performance. A sense of hopelessness, a feeling that the struggle is not worth the effort, may prompt one to take the path of least resistance, of passive resistance, rather than engaging the difficult task of constructive conflict. We might even examine our own behavior to see if we have unwittingly enabled the passive-aggressives with whom we live and work to exercise their subtle ploys, because again we wanted to avoid conflict that might result from a confrontation with them.

Ultimately, it is a matter of simple honesty. The second son makes himself out to be a different kind of person than he actually is. The first son may be rebellious, but eventually he gets the job done, he is direct and he is honest. Let's pray that we can be honest and forthright in all our communications with each other. For as Jesus says in another place, "When you mean yes, say yes; when you may know, say no. Anything more is from the Evil One."