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Conflict

Lessons in Leadership

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, YEAR A

This worship service addresses the uncomfortable but unavoidable reality of conflict, looking to Jesus' clear roadmap in Matthew 18 for faithful reconciliation. Rather than airing grievances, we will use this time to practice empathy, praying for those we experience friction with and recognizing them as fellow image-bearers of God. Ultimately, we will be reminded that we do not navigate these difficult challenges alone, finding our refuge and strength together in God's protective presence.

REFERENCES

Exodus 12:1-14

Psalm 149

Romans 13:8-14

Matthew 18:15-20

COLORS

Green

Worship Planning Notes

Focus text: Exodus 12:1-14, Matthew 18:15-20

Few of us want to talk about conflict. Even if you don't identify as conflict-averse, my guess is that you still don't particularly like conflict. Conflict touches us where we're most vulnerable. It can feel like a threat to our sense of peace, community, and even sometimes our sense of self. Yet, as much as we may dream of a world without conflict, we aren't there yet.

So, how do we enter into and move through conflict faithfully? Amazingly, Jesus gives us a road map. Of all the things that we wish Jesus had given us clear answers for, we get a very clear picture of how to navigate conflict in Matthew 18. That raises the question, “Why don’t we use it more?” Maybe your experience with this passage is different, but in my experience, I’ve heard sermon after sermon about how to follow Matthew 18’s guide for handling conflict, but I rarely saw leaders use it. I wonder if that’s because it requires skills that are uncomfortable to practice. Jesus asks us to have the courage not to triangulate, but to go to the person one-on-one. Jesus tells us to be persistent in seeking reconciliation and to be transparent, first with a trusted few and then with the whole church if necessary. And if none of these steps lead to reconciliation, Jesus tells us to treat them like outsiders—which means to treat them with kindness and love! This is difficult to wrap my head around in the abstract, much less when faced with a real conflict where I have either been hurt or have hurt someone else!

So, in worship, consider how to practice these skills. No, I’m not asking you to make worship into an airing of grievances. That would go against Jesus’ instruction. Rather, find ways to practice recognizing your neighbors as image bearers of God. Hold space for congregants to pray for people with whom they are experiencing conflict or friction. Invite the congregation to reflect on a recent conflict from the perspective of the other person/people. Remind those gathered that these kinds of exercises are not an invitation to excuse harm that has been done, but to gain grace and compassion for the imperfections and differing worldviews of our neighbors.

And then, like the Israelites on the night of the first Passover, remember as a congregation that we can face the conflicts in our world—the ones we can reconcile and the ones we can’t—because God is with us. When we feel the most threatened and the most under attack, God does not call us to further conflict. God calls us to come together and remember, to lean not on our own devices but to find our refuge together in God who calls, protects, and guides us.

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