

## CONFLICT MANAGEMENT 101

The Rev. Dr. Susan R. Andrews

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Text: Ephesians 2:11-22

A few years before the Berlin Wall fell, Dr. Seuss wrote a parody of the Cold War called *The Butter Battle Book*. It could well serve as a modern translation of our passage from Ephesians for today. Dr. Seuss begins:

On the last day of summer,  
ten hours before fall...  
...my grandfather took me out to the Wall.  
For a while he stood silent.  
Then finally he said,  
with a very sad shake  
of his very old head,  
“As you know...on this side of the Wall  
we are Yooks.  
On the far side of this Wall  
live the Zooks.”  
Then my grandfather said,  
“It’s high time that you knew  
of the terribly horrible thing that Zooks do.  
In every Zook house and in every Zook town  
every Zook eats his bread  
with the butter side down!  
“But we Yooks, as you know,  
when we breakfast or sup,  
spread our bread,” Grandpa said,  
“With the butter side up.  
That’s the right, honest way!”  
Grandpa gritted his teeth.  
“So you can’t trust a Zook who spreads bread underneath!  
Every Zook must be watched.”

The rest of the book unfolds with Grandpa giving his grandson a history of the escalating hostility between the Yooks and the Zooks—and the even more sophisticated weapons that were created as the wall rose higher and higher. There was the Snick-Berry Switch, the Triple Sling Jigger, the Kick-a-Poo-Kid and the most terrifying of all, the Bitsy Big-Boy Boomeroo—a tiny bomb capable of destroying the whole world. The book ends with a Zook and a Yook, standing on top of the wall, glaring at each other—each one holding a Bitsy Big-Boy Boomeroo—

wondering who will drop the bomb—who will destroy both of them first.

When I was growing up, the hostilities in our world were between blacks and whites, between Catholics and Protestants—and, most of all, between Communists and Americans. Do any of you remember the movie *The Russians Are Coming! The Russians Are Coming!?* The initial hysteria of those Alaskans, as funny as it was, actually matched the hysteria I often saw on the evening news. Well, forty years later, human hostility hasn't gone out of style; it's just changed costume. Now the “enemies” are conservatives and liberals, duking it out within both the political and religious worlds. Biblicists are dueling with scientists. Arabs and Jews are still building deadly walls of hatred. And terrorism has given hostility the most vicious face of all.

In Paul's words to the Ephesians this morning, the apostle focuses on the hostility that is threatening to destroy the fragile life of the early church. No, it's not the tension between the Zooks and the Yooks. Instead, it is the wall that has been built between the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians—the name-calling and finger-pointing around issues of circumcision, food, bathing, women—disagreements that seem downright silly to us today. And yet those hostilities were sapping tremendous amounts of energy. The community was fractured. Outsiders who watched such childish bickering decided to have nothing to do with these contentious fools called Christians. And, worst of all, the ministries of caring and compassion that Christ's church was supposed to be about—well, they were being thoroughly compromised, if not ignored. Now, the issues splitting American churches today are different. But the fallout from all this hostility feels uncomfortably familiar.

At the recent General Assembly in Denver, there were three days between the night I was elected Moderator and the afternoon when the debates would begin on the floor. The rest of the commissioners were meeting in committee to formulate the resolutions they would bring to the plenary. Since I would be moderating the floor debate, I chose to stay removed from the committee work. Instead, I decided that I would spend those three days trying to connect with as many groups as I could. I wanted to climb over some of the walls that had been built over the years between the various “camps” in the church. So, I went to fifty-eight breakfasts, lunches, and dinners, held by the various affinity groups and organizations within our denomination.

I visited the pro-life people, the pro-choice people, the gay people, the anti-gay people, the writers' group and the scientists' group and the educators' group, the military chaplains and the Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, the blacks, the Latinos, the Koreans, the Arabs, the eleven seminaries, the missionaries, the clergywomen, the youth—well, you get the picture. In each setting, I brought greetings, commended the groups for their particular ministries, and invited them to communicate with me throughout this coming year.

And then, I decided to have extensive conversations with particular groups. I invited the leaders of the three main liberal groups to meet with me for an extended conversation. This was followed by a similar dialogue with the three main conservative groups. It was a sobering experience, as I sensed the deep-seated anger, the entrenched positions, and the judgment that both sides feel about the other side. After listening, I asked questions, and I urged them to be

open and civil with all the voices in the church. In each instance, I suggested we pray. With heads bowed and hands clasped we prayed to the same God, to the same Lord, to the same friend and Savior Jesus Christ whom we *all* follow. After that experience, I am even more convinced that this Living Christ is the only power who can break down the dividing walls of hostility. But we need to give him a chance.

What Paul offers us this morning is some pretty astounding good news. In a word, he tells us that where conflict and hostility seem to be draining the life out of our souls, peace **has already been established**. By the very design of our Creator, a kin-dom of peace has already been established—where the power to be connected as brothers and sisters has already been given to us. With outstretched arms, drawing together that which is alienated and broken, Christ has knit us back together—offering love where there is hatred, forgiveness where there is bitterness, hospitality where there is hostility, peace where there is enmity. Yes, embedded in the central story of our faith, the cross has already crucified violence. And with a scarred, but risen Lord, we have been given a glimpse of what the new creation looks like—a whole and healed humanity. The church, as the visible sign of the resurrected body of Christ—we are called to be that new creation—to embody the peace that has already been established—and to offer that peace to a broken world. Yes, my friends, God has already torn down our walls of hatred and prejudice with the very sacrifice of God’s own broken heart. In our day and age, if those walls of judgment and hatred have been rebuilt, it is no one’s fault but our own.

Last week, I was in Louisville meeting with the 4000 Presbyterian Women who gather once every three years. This Gathering used to meet at Purdue, and before Bradley Hills decided to dismantle its Women’s Association, some of you here attended some of these triennium meetings full of vibrant worship, stirring speeches, and captivating stories. On Friday morning, the focus of the plenary was war and peace, and there was a riveting presentation that touched every one of us in the audience. Three women stood at three different microphones to tell their stories, a young Arab woman from Palestine with olive skin and brown eyes, a striking woman from Liberia with ebony skin and an elegant flowing robe, and an articulate blue-eyed blond from Colombia who spoke in rapid staccato Spanish. Their languages, their skin colors, their cultures could not have been more “alien” from one another. But their stories were almost identical—stories of war and violence and bloodshed—stories of hostilities threatening to destroy families and cultures. But they also told stories of how the church—as the body of Christ—is trying to be the peace—is trying to stretch out arms of love to heal that which is broken and make real what God created this world to be. Those women, with their shared pain and their shared hope, called each one of us to accountability as peacemakers in this world.

Eleven years ago, in an effort to encourage all of us to destroy the dividing walls of hostility that can so often divide families and congregations, nations and political groups, the 204th General Assembly adopted “Guidelines During Times of Disagreement.” The document is called *Seeking to Be Faithful Together*, and our session here at Bradley Hills has used it from time to time. There is nothing particularly novel or new about these guidelines. They just articulate what most of us already know about how hard it is—but how important it is—to be intentional about how we communicate and how we listen and how we treat each other within the fragile reality we call

community.

I won't share all ten of the guidelines, but a few of them are worth lifting up as we try to figure out how to imitate Christ—how to be the peace that breaks down walls of hostility within our families, within our churches and places of business, within the global community—where we as the one remaining super power of the world are being called to build true shalom among all the nations of the world. In times of disagreement, when differences are building walls between us, the first thing we are called to do is to treat each other respectfully, believing that all of us—no matter how much we disagree—**all** of us desire to be faithful to the values of Jesus. In other words, we are to think the best of others, rather than beginning with judgment and suspicion. Yes, we are called to give each other the benefit of the doubt.

Second, we are called to talk directly and openly and candidly about our differences—speaking the truth in love. Secret parking-lot diatribes never solve a thing. Third, we are encouraged to share our personal experiences with one another—for it is in our stories that we meet the face of the “other”—it is in our stories that we discover how much we all have in common. Fourth, in times of conflict and tension, we are called to figure out the ways we agree with the other, so that our *disagreements* take up a smaller part of the big picture. I have found that in our constant arguments about ordination, both sides of the debate love Jesus, and both sides love the Bible. That provides a large amount of common ground in the seemingly different theological worlds where we think we live. Finally, as I experienced in Denver, we are called to pray—not pray that our own side will win—but that a new way, a common way, a third way might be given to us all.

Perhaps no one in our lifetime scaled and conquered the walls of hostility more heroically than Martin Luther King, Jr. And though the hostility of hatred took his life, the power of his love defied that hatred. And his dream has given life and justice and strength to a whole generation of Americans—black and white alike. In an unpublished sermon, King recalls the early days when he was first catapulted into the civil rights crusade. At the tender age of twenty-six, he felt unprepared, scared, powerless. Already the threats were coming in. He was harassed and jailed for going thirty miles an hour in a twenty-five mile zone. And one night around midnight, while his wife and young daughter slept a few feet away, Martin received a phone call. It was the Klan calling: “Nigger, we are tired of you and your mess now... And if you aren't out of this town in three days, we're going to blow your brains out, and blow up your house.” In a sermon, King reflected on that night:

*...I sat at that table thinking about that little girl and about a dedicated, devoted and loyal wife...And I got to the point that I couldn't take it any longer. I was weak...And I discovered then that religion had to become real to me, and I had to know God for myself. And I bowed down over that cup of coffee. I never will forget it...I prayed a prayer, and I prayed out loud that night. I said, “Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think the cause that we represent is right. But Lord I must confess that I'm weak now. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage.*

*...And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, “Martin,*

*stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the world.” ...I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone. No never alone. No never alone. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.*

Sure enough, three nights later a bomb was thrown on the front porch of the King home. Though there was smoke and broken glass, miraculously—providentially—no one was injured. Hostility was to follow King throughout the rest of his life. But he refused to retaliate. He refused to build walls of hatred. Instead, the faith that poured into his heart that dark lonely night gave him the peace of Christ—a painful peace that sustained him even in the ugliest times.

A few years ago, I read a news story set in the vast continent of Africa. A journalist was covering one of the many civil wars that seem to plague this developing wonderland, and he was touched by the witness of some very wise women. At the border of the two warring countries, he saw a fence. And lined up on each side was a group of nursing mothers. Defying all the hatred and bloodshed that their tribal identities called for, these women were exchanging their babies over the fence—nursing each other’s children with milk—the common, human milk of peace and friendship. These women were giving new meaning to the cup of blessing. They were breaking down the dividing wall of hostility with the very passion of their human bodies. This, my friends, is the power of the incarnation—God made flesh. This is the power of the cross—pain transformed into healing. This is the power of God’s good news in Jesus Christ—in a world of hatred, love has the final word.

May it be so—for you and for me. Amen.