

THE GAMALIEL PRINCIPLE

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Psalm 133; Acts 5:27-42

***“If this plan or this undertaking is of human origin,
it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them...”***

Acts 5:38

So — looking a month or so into the future — where are you going to spend Thanksgiving?

If you're like a great many Americans — unless you have to work that day — you'll spend the holiday with family. Maybe the family will come to you; or maybe you'll travel to the family. Or maybe the people you'll sit with, around the Thanksgiving table, will be *ad hoc* family: folks who are special to you, but to whom you're not related by blood.

Many of us look forward to our family reunions, of whatever sort. But not all of us. For some of us, the thought of sitting down together around the Thanksgiving table evokes a special kind of dread.

It's as someone once said: “Thanksgiving is when relatives gather from all over to be reminded why they scattered in the first place.”

It's the arguments! They do seem to be on the rise, in this increasingly tribal culture. Just as there are red states and blue states, there are red and blue relatives.

When they only see each other once or twice a year, “Please pass the mashed potatoes” can be seen as a provocation.

What happens in families can also happen in the church. But it’s not limited to the present day. The church has always been a place where tribalism can lead to conflict.

Paul wrote about it in 1 Corinthians: **“Each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas,’ or ‘I belong to Christ.’ Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?”**

Then he goes on to make a kind of lame joke:

“I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in *my* name!” [1 Cor. 1:12-14]

Fortunately, there’s a solution: and it comes from the scriptures. I just read you the passage where it comes from. The solution is what I call the Gamaliel Principle.

So who is this Gamaliel? He’s a Pharisee. The advice he offers in a situation of terrible conflict probably saves Peter’s life.

Here's how it comes about. Peter and a few other followers of Jesus have been doing their apostle thing. They've been speaking about Jesus to larger and larger crowds. This has not escaped the attention of the Temple authorities, who are becoming alarmed.

They have Peter and his companions arrested. But it doesn't stick. The Holy Spirit sees to that. In the middle of the night, the book of Acts tells us, the Holy Spirit arranges for a jailbreak. Miraculously, the doors of the jail are thrown open. Peter and his companions are free to go.

But they don't run. They don't leave Jerusalem. They keep on doing their apostle thing, and by now the powers-that-be have raised the stakes. They want them dead.

But relief comes from an unlikely source: this Pharisee named Gamaliel. He doesn't defend Peter and the apostles, but he does argue for a less-extreme approach. Addressing the Council, Gamaliel recalls several recent uprisings by religious extremists that ended badly, with lots of bloodshed. The best thing to do with these followers of Jesus, he suggests, is to ignore them, to wait and see: "If this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them — in that case you may even be found fighting against God!"

With that, the persecutions are over for now — except for a flogging, to which Peter and the others dutifully subject themselves. It's a serious punishment, but it's better than being dead. The important thing is, because of Gamaliel's intervention they've lived to preach another day.

So, who is this man Gamaliel? He's a well-known figure within Jewish tradition. His importance attested to in many Jewish writings. Gamaliel's the grandson of Hillel, one of the two greatest Jewish scholars of all time. Hillel had a huge rivalry with the other famous legal scholar, named Shammai. The divisions between them persist in Jewish thought to this day.

For example, Shammai had said, with respect to the Law, "If it's not in the Law, it is not permitted." Hillel, on the other, had a more moderate view: "If it's not prohibited in the Law, it is permitted."

Gamaliel, as it turns out, was also well-known to another of the apostles: Paul. He was one of his teachers. When Paul himself is on trial, in Acts 22, this is his opening statement"

"I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law..." [Acts 22:3]

For the likes of Peter — a humble Galilean fisherman — to have a towering figure like Gamaliel step up and argue in his favor is an unexpected development.

Gamaliel isn't exactly revealing himself, here, as a Christian believer — although the church would later claim him as such. What he *is* doing is modeling a more moderate and reflective approach than the all-or-nothing tribalism of his fellow Council members.

In times of extremism, it's the easiest thing in the world to take our position with one side or the other. It's a lot harder to stand in the middle, as Gamaliel does, and say, "Let's wait and see."

Gamaliel is willing to put it all into God's hands. While his opponents may fear he's abandoning the field of battle, he's actually willing to trust God to work things out. Is this new movement of God, or is it not? There's only one way to find out: just let it be for a while, and see what the Lord does!

There's a word for this wait-and-see approach. It's an old word, one you hardly ever hear anymore. It's the fine old English word, "forbearance."

You can read about it in Ephesians 4, chapter 2. But you won't see it in our New Revised Standard Version. That version says, "bearing with one another in love." The venerable old King James version says, "forbearing one another in love."

That biblical principle has found its way into our *Book of Order* — the

Constitution that guides our Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). I've got a whole chapter on it in the book I've written called *Principles of Presbyterian Polity*. That's the textbook for the course in church government I'm teaching at Princeton Seminary this fall.

The principle's called mutual forbearance. If you turn in your bulletin to the Worship Notes section — right after the Benediction — you'll see there a quotation from the *Book of Order*, that dates back to the founding of our denomination in 1797. But the idea comes straight from Ephesians 4:2. It says, in part, “we think it the duty both of private Christians and societies to exercise mutual forbearance toward each other.”

Those words were written not long after the Revolutionary War: a conflict that tore the Thirteen Colonies right down the middle. There were the revolutionaries who wanted independence, and the Tories who favored continued allegiance to England. With the memories of that struggle fresh in their memory, the founders of our denomination made sure that the words “mutual forbearance” figured prominently in our ways of living together.

There was another time in our nation's history when the concept of mutual forbearance also figured prominently. In the closing days of the Civil War, President Lincoln was inaugurated for a second term. The Grand Army of the

Republic was still in the field, fighting the Confederate forces, but Lincoln could foresee the day when the warring states would be one again. He concluded his famous Second Inaugural Address with these words:

“With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation’s wounds...”

A finer example of mutual forbearance you won’t find anywhere.

There’s something in us that yearns for the simple, the two-dimensional, the black and white. Part of us wants the world we live in to be a simple world of good and evil, like the old movie Westerns — where you can always tell who the good guys are by what color hat they wear.

The real world, for better or for worse, is more complex than that. In that real world, God calls us to engage with our neighbors, to listen to them, to enter into dialogue, and ultimately to seek together to discern the presence of God in our midst.

Sometimes that process puts us in a place where the only thing we can do — if we are to maintain any sense of unity — is to “agree to disagree.” That’s one of the hardest things in the world to do, because of that yearning for simplicity we

have inside us. We want there to be clear winners and losers: and always we want to number ourselves among the winners.

There's an old story about a village in Scotland where there were two churches: a Church of Scotland parish and a Free Church of Scotland parish. If you know anything about Scottish ecclesiastical history then you know the Free Church broke away from the larger Church of Scotland generations before, in a theological dispute. One of the things they argued over was whether or not it was proper to sing hymns in church: or whether the only thing you could sing in church was psalms from the Bible, set to music. Seems silly today, but the division in the church has persisted ever since.

In this particular village, the Free Church building caught fire one day and burned to the ground. Having no other worship space, the Free Church pastor came to see his counterpart from the Church of Scotland, hat in hand. He begged permission to use their building on Sunday afternoons, until construction of their new sanctuary was completed.

The Church of Scotland pastor, of course — being a good Presbyterian — had to take the matter to his Kirk Session for permission. A lively debate ensued. All throughout the debate, the elderly Clerk of Session sat by in silence. Finally,

he stood, indicating he was ready to speak.. The room fell silent.

The Clerk of Session said simply, “It isnae right, and it isnae proper, but it does appear tae be the will o’ God.”

The Session voted to invite the competing congregation to use their building, rent-free.

If our understanding of God’s will and work is truly consistent with our Presbyterian and Reformed tradition — a tradition that takes seriously the majesty and power of God, and the sovereignty of God over all creation — then we cannot afford to risk missing something new that God may be doing in our midst.

Another story. This one comes from Hunter Farrell, who used to direct our church’s office of Global Mission, which oversees our mission workers around the world. Hunter was visiting Presbyterians in Peru, at a time when that nation was just coming out of a time of political turmoil.

In a worship service in one of Peru’s impoverished indigenous communities, the local pastor called his congregants together and had them stand in a circle. He stepped into the middle of the circle holding his Bible, and set it down upon the ground.

This got everyone’s attention: because, in that culture, laying a Bible on the

ground was a sign of disrespect for the scriptures. But Pastor David had a point to make:

“Brothers and sisters, what is the one thing we must do each day to be a disciple of Jesus Christ?” There was an uncomfortable silence. A teenager answered, “We must follow Jesus every day.” “Yes,” answered David, “so everyone — take a step toward the Living Word,” and we all took a step toward the Bible. “What happened?” he asked. Again, silence. He asked us to take another step toward the center of the circle. Now we were standing uncomfortably shoulder to shoulder. “What happened?” he repeated. Finally a young girl responded, “Pastor, we came closer together!” Suddenly, we began to understand.”

Mutual forbearance between two people who disagree is hard. But the thing that truly makes it possible is the presence of a third party in the relationship: Jesus Christ. As long as we keep our eyes on him, and together move towards him, inevitably we will find that we move closer to each other as well.

So, when we find ourselves at odds with someone else in the church, whom we consider either too liberal or too conservative, it’s not a bad thing to stand with Gamaliel. Like him, let us be willing to put on pause our tendency to battle each

other, creating a gracious space where God has the freedom to act. And let us watch, actively and attentively, to discern signs of what the Lord is doing in our midst!

Let us pray:

**Lord, as the psalmist writes,
“How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!”
You have made us for unity: and for community.
Whenever we find ourselves in conflict with our neighbors:
in our families, our neighborhoods, our society,
and even your church,
give us the wisdom to pause, to pray,
to wait and to discern
what you would have us do,
and how you would have us love one another.
In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.**

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