

Sermon: Proper 23A

Title: Compromise Like a Christian

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“Oh yeah? Yeah! Oh yeah? Yeah!”

“Mine is better than yours.”

“Is not.”

“Is too!”

“Well, mine is better than yours.”

“Is not!”

“Is too!”

And on it goes...

It sounds like two elementary school children arguing on the playground. And before long, the teacher is going to come back, hear all the noise, and send both of them to the principal's office.

But that little argument could just as easily happen in a church.

In fact, something very much like it did.

Paul's letter to the Philippians is one of the most joyful books in the New Testament. Again and again Paul tells them to rejoice. “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” Be joyful. Remember who you are. Remember whose you are.

And then, almost in the middle of all that joy, Paul has to stop and say something about two women named Euodia and Syntyche.

We know almost nothing about them. We don't know what they were arguing about. We don't know who started it. We don't know whose idea was better.

We do know that they were faithful Christians. Paul says they had struggled beside him in the work of the Gospel. They were not troublemakers who had wandered into the church looking for a fight. They were people who had worked hard for Christ.

And yet, somehow, they ended up in a disagreement serious enough that Paul felt the need to address it publicly in his letter.

What a legacy.

Two women who had faithfully served Christ for years are remembered by Christians two thousand years later because they couldn't get along.

There is something almost funny about that, except that it is also painfully familiar.

Churches have always had disagreements.

Sometimes the disagreement is about something important. But sometimes it is about something that, when we look back on it later, seems awfully small.

We become convinced that our way is the right way. We know how something ought to be done. We have an opinion, and we want everybody else to have the same opinion.

And before long, the disagreement becomes more important than the mission of the church.

Paul doesn't tell Euodia and Syntyche which one of them is right. That is worth noticing. He simply says, "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord."

In other words, remember what matters most.

You belong to Jesus.

You have worked together for the Gospel.

Don't allow a disagreement to destroy something that is more important than the disagreement itself.

And then Paul asks someone else in the congregation to help them. That is important, too. Sometimes we need somebody who is not directly involved in the argument to help us find our way back to one another.

Paul goes on to say, "Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near." That is a pretty good word for the church in every generation. Let your gentleness be known.

Not your stubbornness.

Not your temper.

Not your ability to win an argument.

Your gentleness.

Christianity does not require us to agree about everything. We are not all going to think alike. We have different personalities, different experiences, different ideas and different ways of looking at things.

But we are called to follow the same Lord. That ought to make a difference in the way we disagree.

There is a saying that I have heard attributed to several different people: “Don’t attend every argument to which you are invited.” That is pretty good advice.

Sometimes the most Christian thing we can do is simply refuse to take the bait.
Sometimes we need to say, “This really isn’t worth losing a friendship over.”
Sometimes we need to take a breath, step away, pray, and come back later.
And sometimes we need to admit that the other person may actually have a point.

Compromise is not always a bad word. There are certainly things in our faith that we cannot compromise. But there are plenty of other things where we can give a little for the sake of peace.

G.K. Chesterton once said, “The thing I hate about an argument is that it always interrupts a discussion.” There is a lot of truth in that.

An argument can turn people against one another. It can take the joy out of a friendship, a family, a congregation, or even a nation. And churches are not immune.

That is why Paul brings the Philippians back to Jesus. He tells them to rejoice. He tells them to be gentle. He tells them not to be anxious, but to bring everything to God in prayer. And then he gives them something positive to think about:

“Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable... think about these things.”

That may be one of the most practical pieces of Christian advice in the Bible.

What are we choosing to think about?

What are we rehearsing in our minds?

Are we constantly going over what somebody said to us three days ago?

Are we keeping score?

Are we preparing our next response while the other person is still talking?

Or are we thinking about what is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing and worthy of praise?

Every time I put on my vestments and prepare to lead worship, I have a little prayer that I say: “God, empty me of me and fill me with thee.” I think that is a pretty good prayer before an argument, too. “God, empty me of me and fill me with thee.”

Because most of the time, the problem is not simply the issue we are arguing about.

It is me.

My pride.

My need to be right.

My need to have things done my way.

My unwillingness to let go.

And when I can get myself out of the center of things and put Christ back in the center, the whole situation can look different.

Paul does not tell Euodia and Syntyche to forget everything they believe. He tells them to be “of the same mind in the Lord.” That is where Christian unity begins.

Not with everybody thinking alike.

Not with everybody getting their own way.

But with everybody remembering that we belong to Jesus Christ.

So when the next argument comes—and sooner or later, there will always be another one—we might pause before we jump in. We might ask ourselves whether this is really worth the damage it could cause. We might listen before we answer. We might give somebody else the benefit of the doubt. And we might remember the words of Paul: “Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.”

The Lord is near. Near enough to hear us when we are angry. Near enough to forgive us when our pride gets the better of us. And near enough to help us find our way back to one another.

So, beloved, rejoice in the Lord.

Be gentle.

Pray.

And when you are tempted to make winning the argument more important than loving your neighbor, remember Euodia and Syntyche and compromise like a Christian. And remember Jesus.