

Trinity 12 (EP-3) (2018)

Benjamin Franklin is credited with saying that there are only two things certain in life: **death** and **taxes**. To these two might be added a third: **conflict**.

Both our Scripture readings today seem to confirm this premise. Both remind us of the pervasiveness of this grim reality.

In the first, the conflict is within a family, the Royal family. We might title today's episode in the David saga: **Conflict in Camelot**.

Absalom, one of David's sons, a very dashing but cunning young man, has stolen the affections of the people and has staged a rebellion.

A civil war has erupted, and David has been forced to flee his capital city.

In our New Testament lesson, we likewise encounter conflict. This time it is between two stalwart leaders in the Early Church – Paul and Barnabas.

As the passage opens victory in the air.

Paul and Barnabas have guided the Council in Jerusalem to put no bars before Gentile converts. They don't have to get circumcised!

Great news especially for the church in Antioch where there were a number of Gentile believers.

Having that battle behind them, Paul proposes that he and Barnabas re-visit the churches they had founded on an earlier missionary journey. And, it is here where the conflict between the two begins.

Barnabas wants to take his cousin John Mark on the trip. Paul will hear nothing of it. Why?

Because on their first journey Mark had proved unstable and had deserted.

One strike and you are out was Paul's stance, and he wasn't bulging an inch.

I won't say they came to blows, but they certainly had words. In verse 39, we read:

“And the contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other.”

It was really sad. What started out as a small thing got magnified, and the two parted company over it.

But, isn't that often the way it is? Many things that cause divisions in churches start out small, but get blown up out of all proportion.

Who was right and who was wrong in this controversy is hard to say?

Was Paul being practical and Barnabas letting his heart lead him because this young man was his cousin?

OR – was Paul being pig-headed and Barnabas in the right by offering young Mark a second chance? Again, it is hard to say.

What followed was that Paul took Silas, another Christian friend, and began what we now know as his Second Missionary Journey, while Barnabas and Mark and set off on a separate journey.

Moreover, what happened to Paul and Barnabas still happens. Conflict is still very much a part of the life of the Church.

Think about what you find as you drive the backroads of North Georgia. You often come upon two churches of the same denomination across the road from each other.

If you asked someone in those communities, ‘Why two churches?’ You would probably be told that it had something to do with someone falling out with someone else.

. . . maybe 50, 60 or more years ago.

At this late date, they may not be able to remember the exact nature of the conflict, yet there sit the two churches testifying to it.

Conflict in Camelot. Conflict in churches. And, indeed, conflict in every area of human life. That appears to be the way things are in this old fallen world.

In response, I want to look this morning at three questions.

- What is the source of conflict?
- Where is God in conflict?
- What should our response be?

Let's begin with the first – **what is the source of conflict?**

In the David saga the source is not too hard to pinpoint. Indeed, you can draw a straight line from it to **David's great sin**.

When I say David's great sin I think you know the sin I am talking about. It was David's indiscretion with the wife of Uriah the Hittite, a woman by the name of Bathsheba.

This sin, as I am sure you will also remember, led to another sin, the sin of murder.

David gave directions to one of his generals to put Uriah into the thick of battle and then to withdraw supporting troops. Of course, he was killed.

If David was a great sinner, so he proved to be an even greater repent-er, and God forgave him his sin.

Yet, as is so often the case, consequences remained. Think of a row of dominoes going down. That is the way it is with sin.

In David's case, what followed were: broken family relationships, murder, incest, rebellion and a divided kingdom . . . all because of what started out as a 'private sin'.

Sometimes the source – the beginning point of conflict -- can be laid at the door of some particular sin, as it David's case, **but not always**.

Take, for example, the conflict between Paul and Barnabas. In this case no great sin precipitated the chiasm that came between these two friends.

On the contrary, both seemed to have been acting with integrity. Nevertheless, a fracturing – at least temporarily – occurred, and it was very sad.

If there was a sin, it was a lack of charity on the part of one or both in not seeking common ground and in not immediately seeking reconciliation.

What is the cause of conflict?

I think we have to say there is no single cause, other than we live in a fallen world, a world awaiting full redemption at our Lord's coming.

Let's move to our second question: **Where is God in conflict?**

In David's case, God was right in the midst of it. God did not abandon him, even though David's troubles were in some sense of his own making.

That seems to be the way God works in general.

"If we are faithless, he [God] remains faithful" we are told 2 Timothy 2:13. God stays on the job, even when we behave badly. He remains faithful to his promises.

God did indeed remain faithful to the promises He had made to David.

One of David's sons, Solomon went on to inherit the throne of his father. The dynasty God promised to David became a reality, and – most important of all - from this dynasty came our Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world.

God's faithfulness can also be seen at work in the story of Paul and Barnabas.

These two ended up taking two separate journeys, and **God went on both.**

God overrode evil – conflict – with good by expanding and multiplying the spread of the Gospel.

What about you? Do you find yourself this morning in a situation involving conflict, perhaps with another family member?

If so, remember we have a big God who doesn't abandon us and who is able to bring good out of ill.

Trials can break us or make us strong. Let God do the latter in your life.

Let's move now to our third question: **What should our response be to conflict?**

Well, first, **it should not be one of surprise.**

“In the world ye shall have tribulation,” Jesus told his disciples on one occasion.

Secondly, **it should be one of prayer and discernment.**

We should not automatically assume our side is right and the other is wrong. Take it to the Lord in prayer.

Thirdly, **it should be one in which the door leading to reconciliation is left open.**

“Live at peace with all men,” says St. Paul in one place.

But finally, and this is the bit we can draw from today's passage: **Don't get discouraged and quit. Just carry on.**

Think about Paul and Barnabas. They did not throw in the towel and give up. Both, with their respective companions, set out on missionary journeys.

They did not let the conflict between them blunt their mission.

Both said in effect: “I have decided to follow Jesus . . . no turning back, no turning back.”

When conflict rears its ugly head – and it will from time to time -- don't be surprised, don't seek to deal with it in your own power and wisdom, **do** pursue peace, and finally:

Decide to follow Jesus, come what may.

Death, taxes and conflict. These three are inevitable. But God is greater than them all.