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## *Caring Through Conflict*

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon Cathy Zappa  
The Third Sunday after the Epiphany – Year C**

We have so much good news today, my friends! There's the good news of Jesus Christ, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, proclaiming good news to the poor, release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and the year of the Lord's favor. Here, today. *This* day.

But that's not all. There's also the good news that you, *we*, are the body of this very same Christ and individually members of it. We *belong*, through him; and we are *called* to proclaim, with him, the Good News of his salvation to all people. God has a place and a purpose for each and every one of us!

It's enough to send you off and running... to church!.. to answer this call with other, like-minded Christians. But it takes just a few long committee meetings before you realize that these other Christian's aren't so like-minded, after all.

And so the story goes, since the very beginning of the church. Indeed, as early as twenty years after the first Pentecost, members of the Corinthian church are (surprise, surprise!) disagreeing; offending and taking offense; comparing and competing; leaving out those considered "weak"; and wondering if they themselves—or those others—really belong, after all.

In today's epistle, Paul assures them that they *do*. They *do* belong, to each other, and to God, and to the Church, each and every one of them: the eye and the foot and the hand and the nose and the nose hair. The activist and the contemplative. The extrovert and introvert. The conservative and progressive, young and old, happy and sad, and everyone in between. Each has something to offer and a perspective that others need.

It sounds beautiful, doesn't it? And inspiring? But let's face it. It's also really messy.

Trust me! I know! You see, I had an experience recently, which you may have had, too: quarantine. My husband came down with COVID, way back in the old days, when the quarantine period was still a strict 10 days. Ten, long days, of our family of five figuring out how we were going to do this. Negotiating who could do what, all with different needs, priorities, and values, and different ideas about what health and safety required of each of us... and of each other.

One of my children tends to be especially cautious, and another especially relaxed, about pretty much everything. One content to stay at home and read—or, let's be honest, watch TV—, while needs to be out and active. I was focused on staying well for my family, and for our church, while my college children were eager to be with friends they hadn't seen for months. And my husband, my poor husband! He was lonely, and bored, isolated in a bedroom, dependent on others—namely, me—for his every need.

It was rough. I'm not going to lie! There was a lot of arguing, with some yelling and stomping off and door slamming. But here's the thing: underneath it all, we loved each other, and we were family. We argued, because we cared, and because we could. And because what each of us did affected the others.

So we had conflict, yes. But it didn't undo us. We were held together—our differences were *held*—by relationships and histories, by a union, that transcended this stressful, confusing moment and all the disagreements and ugly behaviors that took place within it.

Where two or three are gathered together, there is conflict. So why on earth does Paul write that God arranged

the Christian body this way, “*that there may be no dissension*”? Is that even possible? Not if by “dissension,” we mean disagreement or conflict. The Greek word Paul uses is actually *schisma*, translated “schism.” It’s a tearing or rending apart. A cutting off. A denial of the other’s humanity or belonging.

One form it can take is “shunning,” a term used by Sarah Schulman in her book *Conflict Is not Abuse*. “Conflict,” she says, “is rooted in difference, and people are and always will be different.” It’s not conflict itself, or even difference, that’s the problem. It’s our “overreaction to difference.”<sup>[i]</sup> And shunning, she says, is a favorite overreaction to difference.

Shunning isn’t the same as separation. Sometimes, some kind of separation is necessary, as in the case of abuse, addiction, or any situation or relationship that is causing actual harm. Sometimes, gaining distance, or insisting on change or clear and firm boundaries, is the most loving and hopeful thing one can do.

That’s not shunning. Shunning is “detaching with an axe,” to use a phrase from Al-Anon. It’s “a way to attack while hiding out.” To avoid examining oneself or facing problems, by eliminating the other person or persons and whatever they think or see or represent, literally refusing to speak to them and pretending that they don’t exist.<sup>[ii]</sup>

And shunning is highly effective! It’s effective at making people feel better and superior. It’s effective at bolstering a group’s sense of cohesion and identity. And it’s effective at causing great pain and escalating conflicts to the point of real harm.

Yes, the group or community or friends surrounding a conflict, or a conflicted party, can contribute to escalation. But they also can contribute to healing and repair.

Which brings us back to Paul. The Christian community is not just human. It’s called into being and grounded in and sustained by *God*. *God* arranged the Christian body “that there may be no schism--or shunning--within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another.” “Care” is Paul’s answer to schism: the same care for all members of the body of Christ: for the head, and for the pesky nose hair. For the toe that gets stepped on, and for the foot that steps on it.

But how? What does that look like? Well, it doesn’t look like leaping to your aggrieved friend’s side, no questions asked; and feeding their anger and reinforcing a one-sided version of things; and rushing to punish whoever happens to be on the wrong side. No, communities of care and repair proceed more cautiously and responsibly. They take *time*—time to understand, from as many perspectives as possible; and they’re willing to tolerate the uncertainty and discomfort that can create. They hold, or comprehend, difference, recognizing that all people have contradictions, *and* all people are worthy of love and care. And finally, they seek and encourage alternatives to escalation, blame, scapegoating, shunning, and schism, in all areas of life. They practice, and witness, to another way by, for example, praying together, confessing and repenting, giving and receiving forgiveness, speaking and listening face-to-face, and believing, stubbornly, in grace and reconciliation.

It sounds super-human, doesn’t it? That’s because it is! It’s only possible in and with *God*, in whom we are One, and who holds all of this, and all of us, together. It’s only possible because *God* loves us, each and every one of us, and has chosen us. And because there’s nothing we or anything else can do to undo our belonging to *God* and one another. Isn’t that good news?

It’s good news that, I hope, emboldens us commit to care and repair, and helps us hold steady through these anxious and conflicted times. And it’s good news that the world needs, and that is ours to proclaim, as the body of Christ, through our life together and our persistence in loving care.

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[i] Sarah Schulman, *Conflict Is not Abuse* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2016), 20.

[ii] Schulman, 21.