

“Fighting Well”

1 Corinthians 13

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Michael H. Montgomery, Sept. 11, 2000

The beginning is always before it begins. A concern that was not heard, a fear or wound long dormant, nursing itself with an unholy spiritual power until at the right time with the right person and the right issue, the wrong word is said and a position that could be more flexible is drilled into concrete and people take sides and share information/gossip and lo and behold, there is a fight. Instead of two people raging over an issue, its two people raging at each other. Instead of the people directly concerned doing the arguing, it is their allies who snipe. Eventually, people who have no idea of what the initial conflict is about get drawn in, and then there can't be a resolution, because most of the combatants don't know what the fight is really about.

Sometimes churches split. The Baptists are famous for multiplying by division. Sometimes the church withers away and dies, the survivors grimly holding on. Sometimes a consultant is hired to unpack the fight, usually at around \$2,000. Sometimes they work, sometimes they don't. Sometimes the fight goes away, only to reoccur another time over another issue.

Current literature on conflicts in churches is somewhat uncomfortable, because those who apply it find that it doesn't always help. More recent research done by George Thompson of the Chicago Theological Seminary suggests that paralyzing church fights tend to occur in organizations that have lost their sense of purpose, their reason for being. Then, lots of fights emerge, over what would at other times be viewed as little issues.

My conclusion is that conflict in churches is primarily a spiritual issue. We fight over issues that have deep symbolic power in our lives. If they weren't important, we wouldn't fight over them. Those are spiritual issues as much as they are systemic and political issues. I have given up trying to avoid conflict in churches. Too often that means avoiding difficult issues. In any event, it can't be done. My concern is that we don't fight very well. Fighting for love leads to hatred, and love loses. From the perspective of Scripture and a few scars of my own, let me suggest ten disciplines for fighting well in churches.

- **Know who is God.** Not yourself, not the concept or idea or person for whom you would fight. Even the best of the reasons for which we would justifiably fight with another are at best penultimate. In deed, the most

dangerous fights, for our own soul's sake, are those that are fought for the best reasons. Why are they dangerous? Because we are tempted to dismiss our opponents and use means that we would not want used against ourselves. We surrender to evil in order to fight evil.

- **Beware of quiet.** It is not the same as peace. It could mean that we don't know what to do, and so aren't. It could mean that we are afraid to do anything, and so live in a sort of cold war in which nothing happens. It could mean that this is the lull before the explosion, in which case, duck. It could mean that the losers of any fight get beaten pretty bad, and so don't dare voice objections. The quiet of false community does not signify community, but avoidance and the absence of love.
- **Fight good fights.** Who it is that Jesus is for you. What it means to accept the cost and joy of discipleship. How the community of the church accepts its mission to love God and neighbor. These are all issues to which there are no easy or self-evident answers. To really wrestle with the issues will involve disagreements, conflict. And that is just fine, so long as the conflicts don't take control.
- **Beware of winning.** If you've won, then probably someone else has lost, and while that may be good in a game, this isn't a game. It's a community of God which in its life deals with issues of ultimate truth and worth. Studies indicate that in a really good, nasty, deep down church fight over whether to fire the minister (the nastiest kind of fight, at least for ministers), the winning side usually leaves the church. I don't know why.
- **Know yourself---and your enemies---as sinners.** At times, really rotten, soul-sick, miserable sinners who don't realize the evil they do or are tempted to become. Sinners who will need forgiveness from God almighty. I know it's old fashioned theology, but it helps to distinguish ourselves and our opponents from the stupid things that we do and say. It also reminds us that we all need grace, all need forgiveness.
- **Discern the spirits.** What are you feeling about a conflict? If you feel angry, why? If you feel hurt, why? If this seems to be a really big issue, why? What does it symbolize to you? What may mean to you our rightness before God may be for someone else a piece of furniture that is in the way. Know the timbers and specks that live in your eye before

inspecting other people's vision! Know who your friends and allies are, and don't trust them. In a fight, we need the ideas and insights of people who don't think just like we do. Your friends and allies will tell you mostly what you already believe, and so won't help you discern what is going on. In particular, **Search for the spirit of Christ** who lived for us that we might live, and who died for us that we might know eternal life, and who lives for us in God's eternal realm.

- **Pay attention to the process.** More fights are caused by the right decisions made the wrong way than the other way around. It rarely hurts to discuss it one more time, to involve a wider group of people.
- **Pray.** Imagine Christ in the person of your opponent, and pray for them as you would pray for Christ. How does that affect how you envision that person? Name your feelings about an issue or person or symbol or conflict, name your pain and give them to God for healing.
- **Love your enemies.** Treat them as you would want to be treated. Don't do anything that diminishes their human worth in your eyes or in the eyes of another. Treat others as you would have them treat you. If you have a disagreement with them, talk with them about it, not to your friends. That's triangulation, and is the path lit by evil spirits.
- **Build community,** especially when you don't want to. When we are really hurting about disagreement X is precisely when we have to work with our opponents on issue Y in order to prevent our relationship being imprisoned by our disagreement.

All this answers Paul's call to us to embrace the gift of love that God gives us. May our lives reveal that love to the world. Amen.