

Scripture Reference: Judges 16:23;

Matthew 5:21-24: 43-48

I have always been intrigued by the way Carlyle Marney dedicated his little book, Faith In Conflict. It reads like this, "To Victor, who agrees with me in nothing and is my friend in everything." There is more here than just the neat turn of a phrase. It points to a very special kind of relationship where there can be genuine disagreement and yet at the same time the bonds of friendly accord. Sadly enough you do not encounter relationships of this sort very often. As a rule, agreement is the prerequisite of friendship. The basis of our grouping is usually "like-mindedness," but the problem is, this is getting harder and harder to do in our mobile, technological urban culture. Today there is hardly any way to avoid some contact with persons with whom one disagrees. The actualities of life today make some interaction with diverse human beings inevitable. Therefore, if we are going to know any peace within ourselves and a measure of "domestic tranquility" in our world, we need to learn how to manage conflict the way Marney and this Victor were

doing it. What is the secret of "agreeing on nothing and yet being friends in everything?"

As I pondered that question, I was drawn back to the pages of the Bible and to the way two young men handled the problem of radical disagreement. I am thinking now of Samson, whose story is told in the Old Testament, and Jesus of Nazareth, whose story is in the New Testament. There are many similarities between these two. Both were exceptionally strong and attractive young men, having real "charisma" in their impact upon their contemporaries. Yet perhaps because of their strength they were also involved from the very first in swirling controversy with those who disagreed with them. In Samson's case, the conflict was with a neighboring tribe called the Philistines. There had been "bad blood" between these people and the Hebrews for decades, and Samson did not help matters much by the practical jokes he delighted in playing at the expense of the Philistines. Before long however, all humor disappeared, for fields of grain got burned and people got killed. At last, through the maneuvering of Delilah, the Philistines were able to capture Samson, and they promptly shaved his head, put out his eyes and made him the brunt of national ridicule. They even chained him to a grindstone like a work animal and made him walk round and round day after day with the sound of jeers ringing in his ears. Here was conflict of the most cruel and inhuman sort, disagreement that degenerated into sheer destructiveness.

The conflict that Jesus encountered was not as physical as this except at the end, but in some sense it was more intense, because it had to do with the most ultimate of all issues; namely, the shape of true religion. By Jesus' time Judaism had become pretty much a matter of rules and traditions. Life had been regimented down to the last detail. In fact, there were over 600 specific rules of what could not be done on the Sabbath day and the essence of religion practice centered in how you washed your hands and how scrupulous you were about ceremonial details. Jesus approached the business of religion from an entirely different angle. For Him it was relationships that mattered - one's love for God and neighbor and world and self. His concern was that people "might have life and have it more abundantly," so He gave more attention to helping and healing, than heeding the thousand and one ceremonial rules. This set Him on collision course with the authorities, and finally, just like the Philistines, they maneuvered His capture and proceeded to taunt Him and torture Him as Samson had been treated centuries before. Up to this point, the experiences of these two with disagreement are remarkably similar.

However, in terms of how each one finally responded to this treatment, there is a radical difference. Both offered prayers in their dying moments and they could not have been more unlike. Samson had been brought to a coliseum on a Philistine holiday so the crowds could make fun of him, and in the midst of all this, he asked the lad who was leading him to let him rest against the foundation pillars of the structure. There he prayed one last prayer, and it was awesome indeed. He asked simply for the strength to avenge his enemies. one last time. He had been hurt by these people and his last desire was to hurt them in return. Conflict had utterly embittered his spirit, and the story goes that in his anger he did dislocate the foundations of that place and brought the whole thing crashing down. In one last act he killed more Philistines than he had killed in all of his life put together, but in the process he killed himself as well. In fact, that crumpled heap of rubble bears awesome witness to what happens when hatred is answered by hatred and evil is returned for evil. This way of handling human conflict not only burns up the objects of hatred but also burns out the heart of the hater. Centuries later Jesus was to say: "He who lives by the sword shall die by the sword," and how true this was to the final working out of Samson's life. Here was a case of human disagreement escalating into allout conflict and finally brutalizing and destroying everyone.

In stark contrast to the way Samson ended his life, hear now the prayer that Jesus offered as His life was ebbing away. He, too, was in the midst of taunt and derision, but He prayed: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Here, instead of "buying into the hating game," Jesus made what has been called "an asymmetrical response." He did not answer in kind. Rather, He returned good for evil, love for hate, hope for total rejection. Here is the bond of friendly accord remaining intact even in the face of

total hostility. Here is the special kind of relationship Marney was talking about existing in the most unlikely of places. And it raises the question: How was He able to make such a response? What is the secret of maintaining a sense of friendship in the face not only of disagreement but down right inhumanity?

Fortunately for us, Jesus addressed Himself directly to this very issue. In that part of the Sermon on the Mount which I read earlier in the service, Jesus says some very pointed things about the subject of conflict management. He pointed out that the kind of thing that Samson was finally driven to do did not just happen at that instant. It was the end product of a certain way of handling anger and resentment. It is not enough to say: "Thou shalt not commit murder." What you have to realize is that this extreme act begins on the feeling level and the battle is won or lost at that point. It is to this area that Jesus speaks with telling insight.

It is important to note exactly what Jesus said. He does not condemn anger "per se," but only a very special form of anger; namely, anger "against your brother;" that is, anger that gets personalized. Jesus was wise enough to realize that feelings of anger rise up instinctively in the face of injustice and cruelty and situations of threat and it would be both impossible and undesirable to try to eliminate such feeling-responses altogether. Being horrified by that which is horrible must remain an essential part of our humanity.

However, Jesus is saying here that a person can make one of two responses to these anger-producing situations. We can respond on the level of being, and strike out at the personhood of the one who is doing the unjust act; or we can respond on the level of doing and focus our challenge on the shape of behavior and what this means and how it can be modified. Now the negative words of Jesus are directed to this first kind of response. He is saying that personalized anger is what gets us into trouble. When we are not just angry, but become angry with our brother or sister, we falsely identify what he or she has done with what they are. We conclude that one rotten act means the whole core of being is rotten and all you can do is obliterate the person. Jesus traces with keen insight how such personalized anger has a way of escalating. The

word "raca" that is used here is a vivid image of contempt. I once heard Clarence Jordan say that the word came from the sound that one makes as he clears his throat in preparation to spit on a despised person. The word "raca" literally bristles with hostility, and it is only a small step from there to calling one a "fool" and concluding that he or she is an utterly godless creature and thus fit for destruction. We get our word "moron" from the Greek term used here, and it depicts a person who is so morally retarded that there is absolutely no hope at all. It is obvious that when anger is allowed to follow this course, it spreads like wildfire and the kind of thing that Samson wound up doing to the Philistines is the logical conclusion. A heap of rubble in which not only the hated but the hater come to a violent end is a moving symbol of what anger focussed on the level of being produces. And this sort of anger, not anger "per se," is what this part of the Sermon is about.

But Jesus suggests another way of handling disagreement and that is responding on the level of doing rather than the level of being. This is the way of challenging an individual at the point of his or her behavior and pointing out the problems that this is creating and calling them to take responsibility for this. This approach is not an all-out attack on one's being, but a call to change and grow. It rightly distinguishes between doing and being, and recognizes that no one act fully exhausts the totality of one's being. When Jesus prayed from the cross: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," He was saying in effect: "There is still hope for these people. What they are doing now is not the full measure of what they can do. There is better stuff in them yet. Do not give up hope." This way of responding to disagreement is altogether different than the other way, and this is the secret we have been seeking of how to agree in nothing but be friends in everything. Jesus said: "Keep your conflict on the level of doing, not being. When your brother has ought against you or you against your brother, seek reconciliation, not obliteration."

Let me testify from personal experience that such an approach to conflict management really works. These are not far-fetched ideals that never quite touch the ground. I have tried to take Christ very seriously at this point, and again and again, the way has been opened for friendship to be maintained in the midst of disagreement.

I have to remember two things constantly. First, who the person is with whom I disagree. The distinction between being and doing is absolutely crucial here, for to equate the mystery of personhood with a certain series of acts is erroneous indeed. I am more than a sum of my acts. At a deeper level, I am a being whom God saw fit to call out of nothingness and allowed to be. And what is true of me is true of everyone else as well. They are alive because God wants them to be here and has sustained their lives. This is what keeps anger from becoming utterly personalized for me - remembering that I am up against a Divine creation as well as human opposition in any conflict. In illustrating what this word "raca" really means. William Barclay tells of an exchange between two ancient Jews. One man saw another who was particularly unattractive in appearance and he said to him, "You 'raca,' how utterly wretched you look! Are all the people from your town as ugly as you are?" To which the other man answered humbly, "I am sorry I have offended you. Why don't you go ask my Creator why He made a creature as ugly as I?" Such a response puts the issues in true perspective, and reminds us that at the being level the people with whom we disagree do not belong to us and are not ours to handle any way we please. Since we did not create another human being, it is not in our province to destroy that one. "The wrath of man never works the righteousness of God," the book of James (1:20) reminds us. Thus, to remember who it is I am dealing with and confine my action appropiately is important.

The other thing to remember is to challenge at the level of behavior and not at the level of being. The best way I have found to do this is to share honestly with another what their actions are doing to me—the feelings I am having, the problems it is creating for me. This approach is not without its pain, for it is never pleasant for me either to confront or be confronted. This strategy holds the promise of positive results. I still remember something that happened years ago when I went to be the assistant pastor in a large urban church in Atlanta. It was the first time that I had worked on an intimate basis with a large staff of people, and at first I was not too careful about punctual-

ity to meetings. I did not realize the significance this had for others. One day a colleague came to my office and said: "I simply want to share with you what your habit of tardiness is doing to me and to several others on the staff. We are rarely able to start a meeting on time because you are late, and as a result all of our time is being wasted and this creates feelings of resentment toward you." She went on: "I care enough about you to come and let you know that you are creating this problem, and I thought if you became aware of it there is something you can do about it." Now, to be sure this exchange was very painful at first, for who "likes" to be confronted by his shortcomings? However, this approach was infinitely more productive than walking in and saying: "Look, you are an irresponsible person. You don't care about anybody's time but your own. You are self-centered and a pain to work with." That approach would have been an attack at the level of being. It would have been a broadside of my whole personhood and the effect would have either immobilized me by feelings of hopelessness about my condition or so threatened me that I would have been prompted to counter attack in self-defense. Instead, the way it was handled became a challenge for me to grow and led to the kind of reconciliation that Jesus was talking about. We need more of this "tough love" that neither abandons us in indifference nor devastates us by total condemnation. Painful as it was, this one who did not agree but who was a friend anyway really helped me on my way.

I come back, then, to where I started, and that intriguing dedication — "To Victor who agrees with me in nothing and is my friend in everything." How rare such a relation is in our world, and yet how needed! Everyday we are thrown in close contact with those with whom we do not agree. It may be the color of their skin or the color of their ideas or the shape of their lifestyle. At any rate, there is diversity. If we choose to cope here along the lines of the Samson model, I see little hope for our urban culture. But there is another Model — the God-man Jesus — and His way of dealing with disagreement at the level of doing rather than being. This can lead to reconciliation and unending growth.

Here again Jesus proves to be our Savior, the One who enables us to live amid disagreements and diver-

sity and still be friends. God grant that we become His disciples and learn of Him, before it is too late!

Well?