

# 21st Sunday after Trinity 2024

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 20 October 2024

Preacher: Rev. Daniel Avitan

[ 0 : 00 ] Father, we ask for your blessing. Your Word, wherever we find ourselves in Acts, your Word is, it is for our benefit. It is for our learning. It is for our growth. It is for the conviction of sins if we need it. It's for right thinking. Lord, we ask that you would help us by your Spirit and through your Word to understand who you are in greater depths, your heart, towards us and towards the world. And Lord, help us, again, by your Holy Spirit to take these words that they'll go into our souls and, Lord, that we would grow to be more and more like your blessed Son, Jesus.

We pray all of this in his name. Amen. Amen. Having parents from two completely different cultural backgrounds is a wonderful privilege.

That's me, by the way. My parents come from two very different backgrounds. My mom grew up just outside of Toronto but was born in Corner Brook. That's all her family is from. My father was born in the Middle East. His parents come from Morocco. Very different. Completely different cultures. And on one hand, it's a privilege. On the other hand, it's difficult to navigate.

A lot of differences with the two cultures. On my mom's side, conflict was usually avoided. Little things. I'm talking big conflict. I'm not saying, like, you know, somebody ate my leftovers. Like, I'm talking about, like, legit conflict. Was avoided until it was unavoidable. And then, when it was unavoidable, you'd have it out. It wouldn't necessarily be civil. Maybe it would, but by and large, you'd have it out. And usually, the issue wouldn't be the issue at hand, but it would include other issues from weeks and months, maybe even years in the past. It's an interesting way to do conflict resolution. On my father's side, you confront people when you disagree with them, no matter what, even if it's offensive. Like, it's a bit something. It's a bit jarring for our North American sensibilities. A story. So, Christine and I, we got married. We went to visit my family in the Middle East. And my cousin, she went the whole, like, nine yards for us. She shifted her work schedule. So, she was waking up to get to work at four. Not waking up at four, but getting to work at four so that she could get off at noon and give us, like, spoil us for the week that we were there.

[ 2 : 46 ] Wonderful. Loves Christine. But one of the first nights we were there, she said, listen, it's a pity that Daniel didn't marry someone like himself. Like, she just said that right to her face. And Christine's like, like, how to handle that. And then, you know, I know how to navigate it decently. So, we chatted in the topic, the disagreement. We moved on from it fairly quickly. But afterwards, Christine was just like, what was that? Interestingly, she didn't feel offended. Anyways, there's more to that story, but completely two different ways to deal with disagreements and difficulties and conflict. Crazy.

But it raises the question, I'll put it to you guys, what is the right way to navigate disagreements and differences? How do we do it well? How should we approach difficult situations with people we love and especially people that we are in partnership with in the church? How do we navigate this kind of stuff? People come from different backgrounds, different approaches to conflict resolution or no background to conflict resolution. It can be a difficult thing to navigate differences with people that you care for, that you're in relationship with. There's real potential for relational breakdown. So, it's an important question to ask, especially as the church is supposed to be, according to the scriptures, the family of God. That people that belong to the church are a part of that household of God. Brothers and sisters in the faith.

That means we ideally go deep with people. It takes time. There's vulnerability, things to work through. You want to gain people's trust. But by and large, this isn't just some affinity group or club. This is described as a family.

The text we have is short, the one that Jack read. But as with everything in God's word, it is breathed out by God. It is for our learning. It is for our growth. It is for our correction. And this morning, I think it's going to be for our training to how we navigate differences and disagreements in

the church.

And the hope is, according to 2 Timothy chapter 3, that it will equip us for every good work. So, if you weren't here last week, no problem. A bit of a background. We are in Acts chapter 15. And in Acts chapter 15, we have something called the Jerusalem Council.

[ 5 : 24 ] The question is, this is Cole's notes here, the question was raised, can you be a non-Jew and believe in Jesus and be a part of the church? And the answer is yes, you can be. They worked out some of that stuff. And then they drafted a letter that would be passed around to the various churches, informing them of the decision.

And that Jew and Gentile were now one in the church. A Gentile is a biblical term for somebody who's not a Jew. But within the church, the family includes both Jew and non-Jew.

The story, our story, picks up right after this. And it says sometime after this. We kind of more or less think it's sometime in the spring, after when this would have taken place in the Jerusalem Council and maybe the fall or winter time would be the spring.

And Paul and Barnabas, the key evangelists in the first missionary journey, we looked at that a few weeks back. Acts chapter 13 and 14, there's a missionary journey that starts in Antioch, which is in a part of Syria, goes to Cyprus, then goes up to Asia Minor. If you can picture a map, that's the way it goes.

And Paul and Barnabas were key in all of this. They were key in spreading the gospel to these different cities across the known world. So, they had this letter from chapter 15, and they were going to distribute it in the various churches as they would do essentially a reunion tour of sorts back to the cities that they first proclaimed the gospel.

[ 6 : 59 ] They're going to encourage them and give them this letter. It would be a fantastic thing. Paul and Barnabas, they're back at it again. The boys, they're on it. This time, they're not going to sail. They're going to walk it, which is crazy.

But they're walking it from essentially Syria all the way to what is modern-day Turkey, all the way back to Pisidia. Just like a huge journey. They're going to do it. And then, a problem arises.

Barnabas wants to bring John Mark. John Mark turns out it's his cousin. Paul says, not a chance. This guy, back in Acts chapter 13, if you remember a few weeks back, this guy was a part of that first missionary journey, but we don't know why, but for whatever reason, he skipped out.

He did not join Paul and Barnabas and whoever else they had in their crew. He didn't. He left. He went back to Cyprus. We're not sure why, whether it was a good reason or not.

It wasn't really told to us in the text. However, we come to see that it becomes the very issue at hand that we'll see. We'll split these two brothers in arms.

[ 8 : 10 ] There's a disagreement that arises. How will they deal with it? How will they navigate it? Let me read this first portion. Again, page 92 in one of these books, and we'll start in verse 36.

And after some days, Paul said to Barnabas, some days is an interesting way of saying weeks and months, but after some days, Paul said to Barnabas, let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord.

Let us see how they are. Now, Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark, but Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to do the work.

Verse 39, And there arose a sharp disagreement so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers, that is the church in Antioch, to the grace of the Lord.

And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. What's interesting is this text neither condemns nor commends this story as a paradigm for how to disagree with somebody else.

[ 9 : 24 ] It just states that there's a disagreement. So one of the beautiful things about the scriptures is that it gives us a picture of what has happened, both good and bad.

In this case, there is no papering over the issue. There is no ignoring the fact that there is a disagreement. There is a disagreement. There were brothers, and now they have separated. A really significant relational breakdown has taken place, and it would seem that there is no condemning it or commending it. It's just stated as is.

It's very interesting because it says to us that even godly and wise leaders can disagree in very, very honest but difficult ways, and there's implications and there's consequences to that.

They disagreed. They separated. And in this section of scripture and in the rest of Acts, it does not seem like they reconciled. Barnabas pretty well falls off of, it falls out of the narrative at this point. [10:30] In other letters and in other parts of the New Testament, we'll see that it would seem that Paul and Barnabas, they reconciled, that John was now in Paul's good standing, even though before he wasn't.

But for this narrative, that's it. That's all we get. It's difficult. It's a difficult narrative. I think both sides of this, it's funny, the commentators, they'll almost certainly side with Paul.

Paul was so hardcore about the mission that he would not even let a dear relationship get in the way. He was on mission for Christ. And I think that's commendable and wonderful. And right.

But what they don't usually highlight is that Barnabas, the encourager that he is, he saw fit to take time, as long as it took, to restore somebody who had fallen.

Somebody who was not in a great spot. Somebody that needed to be rehabilitated. Not only that, we'll see later on that Barnabas at Cyprus encouraged the church there.

[11:45] So it's not as if he only focused on John Mark. But what we see here are two people with, by and large, the same goals, going about things different ways.

Neither are wrong. I mean, the scripture doesn't say of name calling. I'm not talking about maybe they handled it this way or that way. But by and large, the disagreement is, it's not wrong.

So what can we gather from this section on how to move forward after such a disagreement takes place? I mean, unless there's some gross misconduct that somebody is just completely stubborn about, by and large, issues that arise, people are both at fault, but also people are both in the right. Disagreement is messy. It's difficult. How do you untangle it all? So, a couple things on how we navigate disagreement well. The first thing, it is often better to communicate and air disagreements rather than ignore or deny them.

That can be very hard for some people who struggle with conflict, who would rather peace at any price. It's, I get it.

[13:00] I think there's something, you know, I don't look down my nose at that. Who wants to be in conflict? Who wants to be in an argument? Who wants to be at odds with somebody butting their heads?

It's uncomfortable. It risks a lot. It risks relational breakdown. It risks being hurt or hurting somebody else.

Many of us, we value harmony and relationships at all costs, peace at all costs, like I've mentioned. So, we can bypass constructively dealing with differences and disagreements and we flee conflict. But here's the thing, when you flee conflict, the conflict seldom, if ever, goes away. It usually just gets built up. The example I gave with my family, my family's on my mom's side, it's not like they're not, I'm over-exaggerating for the point of illustration.

But there was times, like you don't deal with things and all of a sudden it comes out and the issue isn't helping out around the house or a snarky comment made.

[14:13] It is months and years of built up frustration that just, it just comes out and it's crazy and intense and where did that come from? But when you flee conflict at any cost, it doesn't go away.

It just builds up. It's a pressure cooker. So, first thing, it's better to communicate and air disagreements rather than ignore and deny them. And I'll just say, that doesn't mean every way that we communicate, even if we step on people's toes and make them feel this big, is better than not saying anything.

No, there's, you need to grow in our communication. But by and large, we can't ignore problems. Conflict is difficult. We should not enter into it lightly or with any kind of animosity.

However, we need to enter into it nevertheless. So communication is important even if it leads to sharp disagreement like we see in the text here. So in this case, we see reconciliation not take place.

And like I mentioned, we see in Colossians 4 and in 2 Timothy, at the end of 2 Timothy, there seems to be some kind of reconciliation that takes place. And here's an important principle with that, is that as we, especially as Christians, we look to address conflict, we have to entrust it to the Lord because some of these conflicts and some of these issues are just too big of a burden for us to handle.

[15:46] They're too big of a problem for us to fix. So we commend them to the Lord and we try with the best wisdom and the best patience and the best strength that God is giving us to address it.

But in the end, we entrust it to the Lord. We ask Him to do the heavy lifting, even though it feels like we're doing the heavy lifting. We ask Him to do the heavy lifting.

So prayer and wisdom, it's key to all of this. The second thing we can see from this text is the importance of staying the course.

Sometimes conflict can be so derailing that it wipes us out. The things that we were responsible for or the things that we are doing, we just take a break from it.

We stop doing it. We check out mentally or otherwise. Here, what's interesting is that this disagreement seems devastating. And disagreements can often feel devastating.

[16:47] But there is great wisdom in not allowing our feelings of panic and pain to shipwreck the good things that we are doing. We stay the course.

that often requires help and often requires inviting people to pray for you and sharing the difficulty that you're going through, which is very difficult.

That's not what we're talking about here. That is another sermon or another talk. Vulnerability is needed. But nevertheless, you stay the course. And we see this. Paul and Barnabas, they're not standing down.

This huge rift happens and neither of them says, this is too much for me to handle. This is causing a huge problem.

I'm done. I'm checking out. No, no, no. Paul continues on with the missionary journey. This time he gets Silas to join him. Later on, it'll be Timothy. But Barnabas also, he is committed to this wonderful, beautiful, broken man that is his cousin, John Mark, who will end up writing the gospel according to Mark.

[17:56] He's committed to him and he sees it all the way. He stays the course. It is not easy to do so.

We have responsibilities and those responsibilities require a level of mental strength and emotional strength and conflict and disagreements and relational breakdown can sap us of that.

And I'll say, don't give up. Don't throw in the towel. Don't check out. You need time. You take time. But don't give up.

Ask for help. Seek the Lord's face. Ask brothers or sisters to help shoulder this burden with you. So the question I want to ask is, how is this way to deal with conflict, how is it any better or different than the best wisdom and it is fantastic wisdom that the world can offer?

I'll say this. Oftentimes, we don't seek out the best forms of psychology or conflict resolution. Oftentimes, oftentimes, we get tools from popular psychology and popular psychology can be sometimes good.

[19:15] Oftentimes, can be fairly detrimental. The idea that you ought to cut yourself off from every toxic person in your life might sound like a healthy thing to do.

And I think there is a place where you just have to maybe not engage with somebody who is abusing and emotionally aggressive. I'm not saying that in all circumstances not to do this.

But by and large, this idea that you cut yourself off from toxic people, what ends up happening is that you fail to judge yourself by the standard of other people. As if everybody else out there is toxic except me.

As if I don't have problems. As if my issues are small and easily dealt with and really, they're not really issues at all. It's just a misunderstanding. But them, they're the problem.

They have the issues. They're the ones that have a wrong way of thinking. But the scripture here and in elsewhere, throughout the scriptures, it commends us to have the mind of Christ which is to seek understanding, to not think so low of somebody but to steel man them as opposed to straw manning them.

[20:32] To seek reconciliation until things get reconciled or until all avenues of peace are spent. And even then, it may not be the end of the relationship. As we gather from Paul's letter, we commend things to the Lord's hands and we trust that in His time and in His ways, He might see fit to reconcile.

That's what we see from here. The reality is sin makes things toxic. It makes people toxic. It makes us toxic.

And the only antidote to that toxicity of sin isn't behavior modification, however good it is. It is to deal with that toxicity of sin itself and that is by the shed blood of Christ Jesus our Lord.

So when we put our faith in Him, He gives us His Spirit and this begins this cleansing work in our lives, changing our view from a worldly view to a godly view.

It takes time. It takes a whole lifetime. But this is the promise for us. What's the big marker of the person who has a heart that is turned towards the Lord? It is a love for the brethren, the love for other Christians.

[ 21 : 46 ] And this is why conflict resolution in the church is so important when differences come about. Because how we love each other and how we approach each other is this proclamation to the world of Christ's goodness and kindness and grace and love.

So if you remember, Jesus washes the disciples' feet and then says this groundbreaking, gives them this groundbreaking commandment.

And this is from John 13, 34 to 35. He says this, A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another just as I have loved you. You also are to love one another.

By this, all people will know that you are my disciples. How? If you have love for one another. This love, again, coming on the heels of Jesus washing the disciples' feet, it implies a servant-oriented, a selfless type of love, a sacrificial love, a love that is willing to get dirty and messy and to struggle with the difficulties of life.

Sometimes this love is difficult to stomach because we are difficult to stomach sometimes. You are difficult to stomach sometimes. And the background that we've had and the experience that we've been through just cause us to have that flight or fight reaction.

[ 23 : 18 ] and we're not willing to engage, but to the best of our ability with God's strength, we are called to love one another and it is messy, but it is wonderfully beautiful.

In the church, by God's grace, this is how we are to navigate disagreements well. Like Paul and Barnabas, Barnabas, such love in relationships it requires a commitment to the Lord, a love for his church and a trust in his providence and grace.

So, Paul goes one way, Barnabas goes the other way and the story then continues on both of them committing the situation presumably to the Lord's hands and we see the Apostle Paul make his trip from Syria to Asia Minor to encourage the churches.

This gets to our second point. If that first point was how to deal with disagreements within the church, how do we navigate differences? Disagreements and now differences. Look with me, verses 16, chapter 16, verses 1 to 3.

Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer but his father was a Greek.

[ 24 : 40 ] He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

If you aren't familiar with the Bible or the Old Testament, why is circumcision mentioned here? Why is an adult getting circumcised? Good questions. I'll try to give just a nutshell of it.

Circumcision was the sign of being a part of God's covenant community, God's people in the Old Testament. It was just for men and boys were circumcised at the eighth day.

Timothy was Jewish and Greek. His mom was a believer but he essentially was a Greek in all aspects of his being.

And from the Jerusalem council we learned in chapter 15 that there was a whole segment of Jewish people that although they were open to the Jesus being the Messiah and Jesus being the Savior and the gospel message and maybe they even accepted it, they struggled with moving past this idea that to be a part of God's people no longer required circumcision.

[ 26 : 04 ] Paul here and elsewhere he is rock solid on this issue. He is saying you become a part of God's family by faith in what Jesus has done not by circumcision but he's saying hold on a second here.

For the cause of differences that we'll encounter if we bring Timothy along and Timothy needs to come because he is this excellent person, he is going to be an excellent brother in arms as we do the missionary journey, if they see that he's a Greek they're not going to listen to us.

Their ears are stopped. We're not going to get through the front door. So we'll circumcise him. Not that we believe that it is a means of faith that brings him into the family of God but it is a way that we can then communicate to get on their level to eliminate a difference between us and them.

I don't know if that made sense. You're going to talk to me afterwards. The idea of circumcision it's like it's a big one but hopefully I've done a decent job kind of cold noting it. So he is not circumcised out of conformity to the law nor as a pretext to salvation but rather as an open door to open doors for this fruitful missionary journey.

What we see here I think is a beautiful picture of how to deal with differences that aren't of first order issue. When I say first order issue issues around salvation or issues around who God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit or issues around who Jesus is fully God and fully man but second order issues or third order issues.

[ 27 : 41 ] It's to eliminate as many differences as possible in a recognition that listen the gospel message itself is a scandalous message and we want it to go forward and that these people will embrace it and we will do anything we can to that end.

So consider the heart of the apostle not from Acts chapter 16 but actually a letter he wrote to the Corinthian church 1 Corinthians chapter 9 and this is what he says in verses 19 to 23 he says this this is Paul talking for though I am free from all I have made myself a servant to all like a pause there that is the heart of the apostle Paul that I might win more of them to the Jews I became as a Jew in order to win Jews to those under the law I became as one under the law though not being myself under the law that I might win those under the law to those outside the law I became as one outside the law not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ that I might win those outside the law to the weak I became weak that I might win the weak I have become all things to all people that by all means I might save some I do it all for the sake of the gospel that I may share with them in its blessings. There's similar sentiments in 1 Corinthians 8 and Romans 14. This is the man's heart in doing this, to eliminate differences, to meet people where they're at. Missionaries across the world, across the generations, have sought to eliminate as many differences as possible, the good godly missionaries that are following in the apostles' footsteps, by adopting the dress of the people, dropping the diet of the people, adopting as many customs as possible of the people that they're evangelizing to, to bridge as many gaps, to eliminate as many differences. Why? So that the gospel message can be heard. It's an act of love. It's an act of service.

It's taking our freedom and not using it for our own benefit, but for the benefit of others. So there's always time to concede ground for the sake of differences. And this is interesting.

There's this very kind of pithy but wonderful quote by a Lutheran theologian, Robertus Meldinius. I have no idea if I pronounced that right. He wrote this in 1627, well into the 30 years war that ravaged Europe, which a big part of it was on religious grounds. And this is the quote.

He says, in essentials unity, those are those first order issues, in non-essentials liberty, that is freedom, but in all things charity. It's a wonderful little line. In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity. This man wrote this. He penned this. Nobody, I've never heard of this. Man, I've heard of this line for years and years and years, but I had no idea who this Lutheran theologian was. And yet he wrote it in almost 10 years into the 30 years war that absolutely decimated a continent. Over what? Differences. Over differences.

[ 31 : 04 ] We would do well, friends, to eliminate as many differences as we can for the sake of others. So I'll ask you a few questions. What motivates your actions? How do you view your freedoms? Are you willing as someone who has been freed from the slavery of sin and death and the resurrection of the Lord Jesus to make yourself a servant of all? For the benefit of unbelievers coming to faith and for believers to be strengthened in the faith? What sacrifices are we willing to do? What things are we, differences are we willing to concede on? Ultimately, the example comes to us of Jesus himself, himself seeing the chasm, infinite difference between him and us.

All the privileges he suspended coming down into human form as a servant, fully man, yet still fully God. Why? In order to bridge the gap, to eliminate the differences, to deal with the differences and the disagreements so that in Christ, if we are in him, we are forever redeemed, connected, connected to him for all eternity. He unites himself to us, to us toxic people.

And the wonderful thing about what Jesus does is that he doesn't then demand soul-crushing, personality-killing conformity. But in him, we can be our most truest self because now we are able to enjoy human life the way that God intended it for us to live, connected to him again.

So Christ is our most excellent example, but also the power by which we then follow his example. So what is the result of Paul and Timothy making these concessions in the hope of seeing people come to salvation? Look with me, verses 4 and 5. So 4 on 92 and then 5 on 94.

Verse 4, The result of being a servant of all is the strengthening of God's church.

[ 33 : 55 ] And the salvation of many who are outside of it. I'll end with this. Disagreements and differences in the world's eyes can very much seem fatalistic. They're emotional and relational dead ends.

But in the gospel and in our text today, in the gospel, such things have the potential of being transformed into opportunities of love and grace. They're not dams. They don't have to be dams that block the flow of a river, but rather they have the opportunity to transform into streams that can irrigate and spread the life-giving flow to many. And friends, this is the strength and the power of the gospel of Christ. Let us pray. Father in heaven, we thank you for even narrative, short little narrative bits in your word like what we read today. Lord, a lot to glean from, a lot to consider.

Lord, we pray that you would give us, first and foremost, a love for those that are in our life that we struggle with, that we come into conflict with. Lord, we pray that you'd give us a great love for them. And Lord, give us also a great courage to the best of our ability so that when such conflict arises by your strength, we would not run away but have courage to walk toward. And Lord, sometimes there is no peace to be found. So please help us to commend such things, such conflicts, such disagreements, such differences into your hands. And trust that you are the great reconciler. You are the one that desires to heal and to piece together and to restore and to redeem and to rehabilitate. And that we'd have great faith to that end. And we pray all of this in Christ's name. Amen.