Blessed are the Peacemakers (Week 1) - Why We Fight



Yesterday's Sermon Summary

1. So why a series on Christian conflict resolution? Well, for starters we live in a culture that's so heavily-conflicted and seems uninterested in handling that in a healthy, productive way. Journalist Amanda Ripley calls it "high conflict," not "good conflict" - we're stuck in dogmatic binary choices, we think that our side has to win and the other side has to lose, etc.

2. But more personally, many of our greatest regrets, deepest wounds, and most visible scars stem from interpersonal conflict that was mismanaged, e.g. a friendship that blew up, a cherished relationship that died on the vine because of the distance created by unaddressed tension, etc.

3. This first sermon focuses on the causes of conflict, or why we fight. The throughline is a single idea - conflict occurs within us before it occurs between us.

4. One source of this internal conflict is physical, what James 4.1 calls our "bodily desires that are at war within us." In regard to conflict, one of those warring bodily desires is our threat detection and response system, hardwired into our brains over millennia of evolutionary history. When we sense danger or a threat, we attack, project, freeze, withdraw, cutoff, and stonewall. And we feel this is going to happen in our bodies - from our tense muscles to the pit in our stomach to our quicker breathing.

5. Adding on to that, when we are "flooded" (as psychologists call it - that is, constantly stressed so that our threat system is always triggered - we lose capacity to resolve any conflict constructively. A "flooded" person either avoids conflict entirely or makes it much worse. So step #1 to being a peacemaker is to know your own threat detection system, regulate it, and structure your life in such a way that, so far as you're able, you aren't flooded.

6. Proverbs 13.10 touches on another internal source of conflict - our tendency to think of our own point of view as absolute, even divine-like (that's the implication of the Hebrew word for "pride"). We fail to realize that we don't see things as they really are; we just see things as we are. In fact, our brains are wired in such a way that we create reasons to justify our emotions and prior perspectives. As Charles Spurgeon, famous English preacher from the 1800s, put it, "He who is in love with his opinion is in danger of being in love with error. It is a true saying, 'He that is his own counselor has a fool for his client.'"

7. So it's incumbent upon us to get beyond or outside of our single story. We need to replace our certainty with curiosity. And we all need a few trusted people in our lives to whom we can turn who won't just echo back to us what we want to hear but will tell us truth, including how we might be wrong or misguided.

8. Last, James 4.1-2 also tells us that conflict arises when we have longings and yearnings that go unmet. Every human being has a set of core psychological and relational needs, such as the need to be heard, respected, accepted, needed, retain personal agency, and be treated fairly. In most interpersonal conflicts, what lies underneath the surface are these unmet needs. So as we enter into a tense discussion, we need to ask - what do I need here, and what needs are driving the other person?

9. Let's mention one more reason why a series like this is so critical - "the Christian conflict trap," as it's been labeled. This is the common false notion among Christians that peace and conflict are opposites, so much so that whenever conflict emerges it's treated like an abnormal intruder. Rabbi Edwin Friedman, a leader in congregational family systems, describes it this way: "Among religious people, the drive for harmony can become a toxic force. This occurs when peace is valued above telling the truth. We frequently mistake calm for health. But calm produced by conflict avoidance is merely the sign of anxious people who cannot tolerate meaningful differences."

10. These words from the late Desmond Tutu, Anglican bishop in South Africa, are a good summary of what we covered in this first sermon: "Peace does not begin with the other person; it begins with us. To be a peacemaker is to acknowledge our own contribution to conflict and to take the courageous first step toward reconciliation."

Exploring the Conflict Within More This Week

1. Questions worth your reflection this week:
- How does the "threat detection and response system" usually manifest in you: attack, freezing, withdrawing, something else?
- How does it feel in your body when that threat detection system is triggered?
- How often do you live in a "flooded" state?
- How does the innate human tendency to justify ourselves and our own point of view show up in you?
- What one takeaway does God want you to put into practice this week?

2. When conflict sparks, try the C.L.E.A.R. method in order to manage your own internal reactions first (2 min. video): The 5-Step Framework for Handling Conflict

3. Here are two short tools to discover your own dominant or preferred conflict resolution style: Quiz: Find out your conflict style and Conflict Management Styles Assessment

4. A major way that our threat detection and response system can adversely affect us is called "amygdala hijack," which is when the emotional part of our brain short-circuits the rational part of our brain...and there are ways to deescalate when it occurs: Amygdala Hijack: How It Works, Signs, & How To Cope

5. Healthy conflict resolution begins with self-management and self-awareness: Conflict Management Is Self-Management

5. On the positive potential of healthy conflict resolution: The Positive Value of Conflict: The Power of Resolution