

The Conflicts and Factions Among Us Are Currently Unavoidable

I have often mulled over a passage from the apostle Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth in which he addressed the issue of church conflict. Paul wrote, "I hear that there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine" [I Cor. 11:18b-19].

I don't recall ever preaching a sermon on this passage – or ever hearing one – so here goes.

In a day and age when our religious, social, and political lives are rife with divisions and factions, there are strong impulses to counsel unity, urge listening and understanding, find common ground, and recommend compromise rather than accentuate the divisions and exacerbate the conflicts that separate us one from another. Paul himself made passionate appeals for reconciliation and love of one another to transcend the differences that plagued the Corinthian church.

But Paul apparently also knew that making nice with one another was not necessarily a prescription for healthy community. Some differences had to be aired, and some factions could not be ignored, in the name of harmony and peace. In short, there needed to be some honest confrontation of differences, some transparency regarding disagreements and divisions, and some serious sorting out of what was genuine from what was false.

Many years ago one of my parishioners made a compelling case for racial conflict in America. He observed that the racism infecting our society could never be dealt with in any meaningful way without open and even hostile conflict that exposed the injustice, the prejudice, and the harm that it perpetuated. If racially oppressed people did no more than ask "pretty please treat us right," our society would never be moved to make changes of the scale necessary to achieve racial justice. At the least, protests, marches, and boycotts are in order to confront injustice. Likewise for gender oppression, economic oppression, and all other sorts of social bias and discrimination: without some disruption and exposure of division, most people will remain oblivious to, or apathetic about, the injustices they wittingly or unwittingly continue to protect and preserve.

In this light, and in the face of current events in our nation, I find that many calls for compromise and moderation ring hollow. False equivalence and "both sides" arguments are especially rankling. We may all be entitled to our own opinions, but not to our own facts, nor to our own values.

Our circumstances are perilous. Very deep and ugly fault lines in our society, economy, culture, and body politic have been exposed by the ascendancy of the man Trump and his party. There have to be factions among us, or else the struggle to sustain a civil, just, and representative democratic republic is already lost.

I'm not claiming that the blame belongs all on one side, but surely the weight of evidence, truth, decency, justice, and common good decisively tips the scales against those currently holding the

reins of power. This is not an unusual circumstance in human history. Power tends to corrupt, regardless of who holds it. But the scope and scale of corruption are unprecedented in my lifetime, and perhaps in the entire lifetime of our republic.

Few of us relish conflict, or thrive on it. But our current situation demands it. We must be prepared to speak out, and engage in responsibly informed but potentially disagreeable and/or disruptive actions, for the sake of the soul of the nation and the welfare of all our fellow citizens and the peoples of the world.

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