

How to Fight Like a Christian
Romans 13:8-14 Matthew 18:15-20

About a billion years ago I was new in the ministry and new to wedded life. Sue and I both worked full-time and our income fell WELL below the poverty level. Here we were, two college graduates working full-time and playing in a “party band” to generate a bit of extra income in an attempt to make ends meet.

As you might guess, things got tense at times, especially in months when groceries started looking like a luxury. And like all newlyweds, we struggled to learn how to cope with all the stressors thrown at us, new jobs, new life-partners and, for Sue, a bout with pneumonia.

I can still remember running into an older member of the congregation about that time at the local discount shoe store. The conversation went something like this:

Me: Hi Mr. Anderson
Mr. Anderson: Well, young pastor.
Me: How are you today?
Mr. Anderson: Oh, fine, just buying some shoes. And you?
Me: OK. A bit stressed, with Sue being sick it's been a bit tense.
Mr. Anderson: Well, don't let it get you down, son. Dottie and I have been married for nearly 50 years and we have NEVER had a fight!
Me: Really? How in the world have you managed that?
Mr. Anderson: Well, every time I feel a fight coming on, I go out and take a walk.
Me: Wow. And that really works?
Mr. Anderson: Yup, works like a charm.
Saleswoman: Mr. Anderson! How are you? Are you here for your regular?
Mr. Anderson: Hi Cindy. Yes I am, same as always.
Me: Huh? Regular?
Saleswoman: Absolutely! Mr. Anderson really likes our walking shoes.
Mr. Anderson: (a bit sheepishly) yeah, my 8th pair this year...

How do YOU fight?

Let's face it, everyone fights. Spouses fight. Lovers fight. Parents fight with their kids and also fight with THEIR parents. Unions fight with management. Students fight with teachers and teachers fight with administration. Political parties fight with each other. It's a rare TV show or movie that doesn't have SOMEONE fighting.

Some people fight for dominance; the aggressive types who want their own ways no matter what. Others fight with stealth weapons; the passive-aggressive folk who are comfortable saying something like, "Oh. That's what you want to do on our holiday? Oh, (sigh) OK. If that's what YOU really want to do. I won't mind" ... (with a subtext of: "I thought you loved me more than that.")

Of course, the world around us has LOTS to teach us about fighting. Who was it that said, "Revenge is a dish best served cold?" Mr. Miyagi instructs Daniel in The Karate Kid; you should not fight. But if you DO fight, win!

What about Joseph McCarthy, the famous American politician who ran roughshod over opponents for years with blacklists and (unproved) accusations of "communist sympathy"? Ray Cohn was his most trusted advisor (and, I might add, a formative advisor to the current American president) who taught that there was only one way to fight. "Fight to destroy. Never apologize, never forgive. Attack. If you are attacked, strike back to destroy. Never let up. Make them fear you. Fear is power."

Ah, yes, the world has lots to teach us about fighting.

For some, there is no option even for disagreement...this view is "We're right, everyone else can go to hell", literally. Why just this week a group of Christians set forth a proclamation that is being called the "Nashville Statement". In this statement, this group of Christian pastor and leaders proclaimed not only the total damnation of every LGBT person, but demanded the "excommunication" of every Christian who supports, befriends or even tolerates someone who is LGBT as there is no room in the Christian faith "those" kind of people.

(These leaders would also like to remind everyone that their views are inerrant and infallible and directly inspired by God as authoritative. This is what they refer to as a "high view." They also claim to have a "high view of scripture," but it's not nearly as high a view as they have of themselves as its exclusive and authoritative interpreters.)

Oh, yes. Christians fighting: Congregations fighting congregations, denominations fighting denominations, traditions fighting traditions, even (and especially) congregations in-fighting with themselves. Makes me proud to be a Christian, Yes-siree-bob!

But what do you expect when you take your instruction from the world?

There IS another option, of course. We just heard it read to us.

Normally when Jesus is speaking He shares parables that invite reflection and discussion. Think about this. Figure out what that means. Discuss.

However occasionally He is very direct and practical. That's both good and bad news, of course, as the easier the instructions, the less wiggle room available for interpretation or discussion.

In today's lesson, Jesus takes it for granted that there will conflict in the not-yet-formed church. It's the way people are. He knew that...we know that.

With something this important, Jesus doesn't give us a parable, but a set of straight forward instructions for fighting and forgiveness.

The irony, of course, is that congregations can be some of the most indirect, passive or passive-aggressive places you'll ever see. And just because it is the church, don't take forgiveness for a given. Church people can not only bear a grudge, but nurture it, feed it, water it and take it out for an occasional walk. In the very place where the Gospel should be manifest in our interactions with others, we may be even more likely to gossip, whisper behind closed doors or near the coffee pot, nurturing old grudges in the dark while denying it in the light.

If we are to learn to fight as Christians, we also must learn to forgive. A necessary part of learning to fight is learning to forgive as God forgives and to do that we have to pay attention to the way God forgives us. In our relationship with God, forgiveness is not a feel-good emotion, it is a choice made in faith.

We need to hear that. Really. I mean it! We, the stiff-necked, rebellious people we are need to hear that a lot, because many of us assume that being able to forgive is a matter of feeling like it – that we will know it's the right time to forgive because we will *want* to – but that's not the way it works. Jesus clearly spells out conflict resolution, fighting and forgiveness if you prefer, in three easy steps. None of them involve “when you feel like it”.

First, go directly to the person who has wronged you and speak alone. If we had the courage, the audacity, yes, the faith to do this, this one act alone would change Christian history.

This step is critical. Before we harbor it so long it poisons us against the possibility of reconciliation, before we discuss it with others, trying to get them on “our team”, before we decide to wait until THEY figure out something is wrong and come to apologize we are told to go and find the one who has sinned against us.

Is this fair? Nope, absolutely not. Does it sound like Jesus? Yes, it unfortunately does. And that may be enough. It's amazing what can be accomplished by simple communication. It's hard, it's scary, it's uncomfortable, but it's the right place to start, the Christian place to begin.

Step two of the Jesus plan is to involve others. But let me make this clear, Jesus is NOT saying, “Go and talk about this person behind their back.” Jesus IS saying, “Bring in others to whom he or she might listen.” The proper role of having others be a part of the conflict, according to Christ, is to give some perspective to the issue. You know, sometimes an outside voice makes all the difference. And sometimes, that outside voice helps you to see that, perhaps, you own a piece of the problem as well.

If that doesn't work, it's time for step three; Christ calls on us to involve the congregation. This boggles the mind in simply imagining how much work we would need to do in our own faith communities to make them places of healing and reconciliation for our members, much less for outsiders.

But the point is clear; the church is meant to be mediators in a world of misunderstanding, peacemakers in a world of passive-aggressiveness and outright hostile/aggressive action.

Now before we go on, let's remember that wonderful declaration from Jesus that He will be where ever two or three are gathered in His name. And that declaration comes in the middle of a discourse about hard conversations and reconciliation. When we gather, Jesus gathers in our midst.

That informs a part of what we, as a church, are called to be. According to Jesus, the church ought to be reducing conflict through direct discussion, accountability and transparency.

Think about it, that's what these instructions translate into in today's words: Direct discussion. Accountability. Transparency.

When the church fails to live this out, when the church fails to invite Christ into our conflicts, when we fail to fight like Christians, we shouldn't be surprised when it's hard to see Jesus in our midst, no matter how many are gathered.

And if we fail to fight well amongst ourselves, through disagreements and/or fights that ultimately lead to forgiveness, why would the world be the least bit interested in how we interact with the rest of the world? The world already has their model for fighting.

But before we leave this scripture for today, it's worth noting that the message on fighting from Jesus ends something like this: "if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." That sounds pretty harsh, until you remember that Jesus came and spent his time SPECIFICALLY with the tax collectors and other undesirables, and Paul gave his life sharing the Good News with pagans.

There is no one, absolutely no one, outside of God's love. Probably something good to remember when we fight like Christians.