

#105
February 9, 2020
Acts 15:36-41

God's Way or the Highway

³⁶ Some time later, Paul said to Barnabas, "Let's go back and visit all the brothers and sisters in every city where we preached the Lord's word. Let's see how they are doing." ³⁷ Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them. ³⁸ Paul insisted that they shouldn't take him along, since he had deserted them in Pamphylia and hadn't continued with them in their work. ³⁹ Their argument became so intense that they went their separate ways. Barnabas took Mark and sailed to Cyprus. ⁴⁰ Paul chose Silas and left, entrusted by the brothers and sisters to the Lord's grace. ⁴¹ He traveled through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

Last Sunday we celebrated a great victory for the church. The good news of God's grace was preserved in this important debate. Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians preserved unity in the body of Christ. No one walked away. No doubt, there were many who were not happy with what had been decided, but they did not insist on "My way or highway". They chose God's way. Strong people with very valued points agreed to listen and were able to compromise. Above all, they were able to see what God is doing. Praise God because of the important thing they accomplished: Christ, and him alone, is all you need for salvation. He fulfills all of the Law and the Prophets, and that was settled by the church.

What can go wrong after that? You would think nothing. We all know that when God is at work, evil is on the attack. I have experienced many times when the Holy Spirit is on the move, when church is on the right path, when we grow, conflicts, disagreements, challenges and attacks will arise. "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Cor.10:12).



Have you met a perfect person? Many newly-weds think they have found one.

I found the description of the perfect pastor:

1. He is the church elder who pleases everyone.
2. He preaches exactly 10 minutes and then sits down.
3. He condemns sin, but never steps on anybody's toes.
4. He works from 8 in the morning to 10 at night, doing everything from preaching sermons to sweeping.
5. He drives a late model car, buys lots of books, wears fine clothes, and has a nice family.
6. He always stands ready to contribute to every other good cause, too, and to help panhandlers who drop by the church on their way to somewhere.
7. He is 36 years old, and has been preaching 40 years.
8. He is handsome.
9. He has eyes of blue or brown, (to fit the occasion) and wears his hair parted in the middle - left side, dark and straight, right side, brown and wavy.
10. He has a burning desire to work with the youth, and spends all his time with the senior citizens.
11. He smiles all the time while keeping a straight face, because he has a keen sense of humor that finds him seriously dedicated.
12. He makes 15 calls a day on church members, spends all his time evangelizing non-members, and is always found in his study if he is needed.



**Pastor, that was the perfect sermon.
It didn't relate to me.**

How about a perfect sermon?

Would you like me to read a perfect church description? In reality we all know that these do not exist. Many times we hear advertisements or read a job description or resume and think: I wonder how much of this is true.

Together, they experienced losses and victories. They suffered attacks and witnessed the power of the Holy Spirit in themselves and in people to whom they preached. They had a strong bond developed by years of experiences together.

Suddenly it all went wrong. It was a swift and severe break up. Barnabas and



Paul would never again work together.

Sadly, our sharpest conflicts often come from those that we know and love. Our deepest hurt comes when we open our hearts, let someone into our lives and make ourselves vulnerable and then she/he cuts you deeply.

A man by the name of Cosimo de Medici once said, "We read that we should forgive our enemies, but we do not read that we should forgive our friends." In practice it may be a lot easier to forgive our enemies because we do not expect much from them, but we expect a lot from friends. When they disappoint or betray us it hard to forgive them.

Which do you think hurt Jesus more: The arguments and the hatred from the opposition or was it Judas' kiss and the betrayal of Peter?

Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them. In chapter 13 we read that John Mark joined Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey, but he left them in the middle of the journey. We do not know why.

Paul disagreed. He did not have time and patience for quitters.

"There arose a sharp contention". Luke uses a strong word in the Greek here to talk about a sharp disagreement—*paroxysmos*.

I can see the heated emotions, the red faces, the loud voices, the things said that were better left unsaid. It must have been a sorry sight.



This time the argument is not about theology or doctrine. It was two men with very strong opinions. The object of their severe disagreement was a person. They were able to lead the whole early church into unity and keep the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ in the center, but two stubborn men could not figure what to do about John Mark.

Paul could not trust Mark. He did not need or want someone on his team who would run in the heat of the battle. He needed a committed warrior.

At the same time Barnabas, "the encourager", wanted to give a second chance to Mark. Barnabas was sure that he grew up and was ready now. We also need to remember that John Mark was Barnabas cousin.

These two men were spiritually mature strong Christians. Both loved and served God above else. They had a sharp disagreement. Did they handle it well? I do not think so. I do not want to say who was right and who was wrong because the Bible does not say that. Luke, the writer of Acts, is not standing on one or another side.

I think today we need not be shocked when somebody who believes in God, Jesus and Holy Spirit, who walks to the best of his or her ability as a disciple of Christ has an opinion so very different from us. What is the best way to deal with an intense argument? Split? After this we hear no more about Barnabas in the rest of Acts. We even do not know if they met again. It is a sad commentary about two men who preached love.



We all have personalities that are strong and we each think very differently. Some people will drive you crazy every time we gather. Personalities do occasionally clash. What is the best way to handle it?

You do not have to look for an answer very deeply and long. Love and unity is above all. Especially this week, when the stores are filled with all red hearts, candies, cards and stuffed toys, let us remember our love of God and our sisters and brothers in Christ. Let us continually renew our love for the body of Christ which is the church. Especially let us practice love for saint makers -- those who help you to truly practice love and patience.

If there is a person who is not your type, the best way is to start praying for him/her. It is, first of all, a call to pray for and bless that person. It is a call to practice holy listening. Can you hear what he/she is saying? Even if you think differently, there is always a way find validity in other person's points. Always ask: How big is the issue? Does it truly shake our understanding of who Christ is? What is the eternal significance?

Never say, "My way or the highway." Always choose God's way. God's way is love and unity – always and for all situations. God's way is to love even those you prefer to avoid.

The same thing goes for families. What are the things you argue about? How important are they in the eyes of God? Why do you argue? Andrew and I have decided long ago that when we disagree and strongly disagree, divorce is not an option. We will talk, pray and look for solutions until we find it together. Sharp disagreements and splits leave scars.

It is obvious that they did not handle the conflict correctly. You will not find verses where Paul and Barnabas apologized, forgave and gave a hug. We do know Paul mellowed later. In one of his letters he mentions Barnabas and speaks of him highly.

One wise person said that if you find the perfect church please do not join it. If you do join the perfect church it will not be perfect anymore.

Why do you and I come to church? Because of the wonderful people? Well, I can promise sooner or later there will be somebody who will say or do something that you will not like.

The Church is a hospital. Sick people come to get healing. We all are broken and we all need healing Christ alone can provide. If you come to church because of the pastor, I can guarantee that, sooner or later, I will say or do something you will not like. It is just a matter of time.

Come because you love God and want to worship Him. Come to give and receive. Come because we are the body of Christ. All of us together make the body of Christ. Come because we help and support and encourage each other. We accept our differences. We are not scared of different opinions. We refuse to limit ourselves to only one kind of people. Even when personalities clash we do not choose the highway. We choose love and that is God's way.

God was not scared by happened to Paul and Barnabas. God's purpose will always be accomplished. The church was able to act God's way. They did not stand on one side or another. Barnabas and his cousin John Mark go off to Cyprus. Was that the beginning of the Greek Orthodox Church? Paul and his friend, Silas, later joined by Timothy and Luke, go off to Europe. Because they stayed focused on their call they were able to continue to bring fruit to their ministry.

There is a message of hope in this sad story of the split between Paul and Barnabas. They were human beings with their faults and failures. God used them. We do not have to be perfect to be used by God. God has a place for you and me in the work for God's kingdom.