

## **“In a Manner Worthy”**

*Philippians 1: 20-27*

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From the late Middle Ages until the Renaissance, northern Italy was divided into factions who supported rival political powers. According to legend, in 1325, a huge conflict erupted when soldiers from the town of Modena stole an oak bucket from the nearby rival town of Bologna. The thieves mockingly displayed the bucket for all to see. Outraged, the Bolognese army marched to Modena to recover their bucket and pride. When the Modenese refused their demand, the Bolognese declared war. This event became known as the War for the Oaken Bucket.

Bologna summoned a mighty army from the Guelph cities. The Modenese also gathered an army. The two armies clashed on the afternoon of November 15, 1325, at Zappolino. The Modenese pursued the Bolognese all the way to the walls of Bologna, where they flaunted their victory before their humiliated enemy. A total of four thousand men died that day. All because of a bucket.

Most of the conflicts we find ourselves involved in, though, are not of that large magnitude. Most are intimate and personal. But they still involve some of the same feelings of vengeance, and hurt, and pride.

In our New Testament lesson this morning, Paul is in the middle of a conflict. The kind of conflict that would cause some to behave any way they wanted to. Paul is in prison for preaching the Gospel, and he faces the possibility of a death sentence. He is not guilty of any heinous deed – just preaching. And for this he gets the death penalty. Even in this situation, behind bars, he is concerned, about how he should properly conduct himself. He says in his letter, **“I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now, as always, Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by my life or by my death.”**

We all find ourselves in conflicts – some serious and some small. And as Christians, we must all be concerned about how we will conduct ourselves **within** our conflicts with others. Paul says that **“Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ.”**

- A treasured friendship has been lost or scarred.
- A marriage where the partners have wounded one another and every conversation

has an undertone of anger, defensiveness, and hurt.

- You have a brother or sister, a mother or father, a son or daughter with whom you are no longer speaking.
- You have a friend, a member of the church who has left because of some disagreement and you have been hurt by the separation that exists between you.

Where you once enjoyed the company of a person and shared many good times together, there is now only tension, anger, or silence. Where there was once a bond of love and intimacy, now you only feel hurt because of the deep chasm between you. We can hide from the need for reconciliation. We can sweep it under the rug -- for a while. But it's still there. You can hold a grudge, or keep resentment hidden inside you. And it will eat away at you.

So how do we conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel in the middle of conflict? As Christians, it's **always our responsibility** to make the first move when a relationship breaks down! We are to take the **initiative** in seeking reconciliation. But what if it's not all my fault? What if it's 90% the other person's fault? What if it's **completely** their fault?

The Apostle Paul would be recalling the words of Jesus (In Matthew 18) who said: **If you remember your brother or sister has something against you** (that is, if it's your fault that your relationship with another person is strained) **then go at once** (that is, take the initiative) **and make peace.**

Jesus also said: **If your brother or sister sins against you** (that is, if it's **their** fault that things aren't going well between you) **then go to him or her...**

Whether we like it or not -- when a relationship breaks down, **regardless of who is at fault**, Jesus puts the burden on you and me – as followers of Jesus – to initiate reconciliation. And he does that because you and I know what it is like to be separated from God. And, we know what it is to feel the relief and joy of knowing that the gap between God and us has been closed because of what Jesus has done for us.

It is the job of the Christian church and those within it to seek reconciliation. This is not an option. There are some options in the life of the Christian – like where and how to pray, and how to baptize and how we celebrate communion. However, reconciliation is **not** an option. Reconciliation with God and reconciliation with fellow believers is what we are all about. Without it we are not who we pretend to be.

When an opportunity for reconciliation is offered to a Christian, then it is incumbent upon that person to accept the offer to make amends. To refuse to enter into that

process is to say that we do not want to travel along the same road as Jesus. Go with a reconciling spirit, ready to listen and to understand. Go with the attitude that you want to be reconciled – regardless of who is at fault. Conflicts are a natural part of life, and you can't live without them. You can't avoid conflict. The question is not how you can avoid conflict, but rather **what you do once you find yourself in a conflict.**

And for that, the Apostle Paul says, **“Whatever happens - conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ.”**

A while ago I was looking for a parking space downtown. I circled around several blocks several times before I finally found one. The car ahead and the car behind had both parked over their lines, and so the space was really probably too small to try to parallel park. But I was desperate, so I tried. Apparently, the driver of the car behind me was not happy at all having to wait while I parked my car! And he felt the need to share his feelings with me!

And as he drove past he rolled down his window and yelled, **“What’s your problem, you...”** and then he made a gesture as he drove off. You know, it was a profound question he asked me. There are a lot of things wrong with me.... but he didn't stick around long enough to discuss those things with me.

Now here's the point. This guy did a lot of things right according to the Gospel imperative. He stopped what he was doing and took immediate action. He didn't wait for me to come to him. He didn't deny there was a problem. He did come to me one on one to tell me. He didn't engage in gossip among other motorists about me. And he asked a good question. And he was impressively direct! But it was clear that he had no desire to be involved with me as a person. He only wanted to blast me and move on.

Of course, that's a trivial and maybe a silly example – and a sad statement on my ability to park! And, of course many of our broken relationships are over matters of far more consequence. And sometimes they aren't. But the point is - too often all we are interested in is giving the offender a blast and moving on. We aren't interested in fixing any broken relationship. We are simply too spiritually lazy to do that. It's so much easier to harbour resentment.

Friends - we contend against conflicts all the time – as a society, or as a family, or as individuals. As much as we would like to try to avoid conflicts, that is not always possible. For conflicts are a part of life itself.

Paul calls us to remember that whatever happens, even in the midst of conflict, we must conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

It is in God's house, at worship, that we are reminded of how far Jesus was willing to come to fix our broken relationship with God. Even though the breakdown between God and us was our fault, he didn't wait for us to come to him. He took that costly first step toward us, leaving the glory of heaven and sacrificing his life on a cross so that we might be reconciled to God.

And he still comes to us today, reminding us of his love for us, forgiving our sins and reclaiming us as his children and members of his kingdom.

Whatever happens – whatever happens. Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of your calling as children of God.