

WHO GOES FIRST?
[written in oral style]

John 8:1-11
Themed series

January 30, 2022
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At the beginning of the mediation class, the instructor wanted to reveal our comfort with conflict. He asked us to form a line and place ourselves to show how we felt about conflict.

One end was very was for uncomfortable. The middle was for those who could tolerate conflict. The other end of the spectrum was for those who enjoyed conflict. We lined up.

Nearly everyone was clustered in the uncomfortable-with-conflict end. A few were in the middle, and I stood with one other person declaring our appreciation for conflict.

I was truly baffled to see so many who disliked conflict.
That distain did not make sense to me because conflict can be so beneficial.
Conflict can be a springboard for growth.
Conflict is intimate. We get to see and experience inner passion and motivators.
And conflict can be very revealing.

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For example, the first big purchase Leslie and I had to make turned into a conflict.

We needed to replace my aging, sporty Honda Prelude. We shopped around and decided on a practical, Honda Civic.  
Then I balked. I recoiled. I did not want to buy that car.  
Leslie was puzzled.....AND.... so was I.  
I did not know why I was arguing against the purchase.

A few days later after frustrating back and forth discussions, it hit me.  
My persona, self-image—my outer shell did not value cars. Yet, my inner self did.  
I did NOT want to make monthly payments for base transportation.  
If the car was fun to drive, then that monthly expense was fine.

There was some ontological pain with that realization that was brought forth by Conflict.

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I shared my intimate insight with Leslie.
Again, a benefit of conflict; it rendered a tender moment.

We bought the Civic with the assurance that the next car would be fun, and it was. I got a Jeep Wrangler.

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Conflict poorly done, which includes defending one's façade, can be very ugly, painful and destructive.

Sadly, too often, we humans resort to anger because anger makes one feel more powerful than fear.

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So, some basic rules for managing conflict are necessary.

These rules are obvious and familiar.

I go over them in pre-marital counselling, and encourage the couple, before a conflict arises, to agree to follow them. <

Reuben, please show them on the screen.

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Following them helps in working through a conflict.

1. Keep to the issue. Do not bring up past problems.

Debating multiple problems gets really messy.

Moreover, as Betty pointed out, our memory is Not an accurate account of the past.

Number 2

No low blows. No personal attacks/comments.

This can be as ridiculous and cruel as saying, “You have a big nose” or “You look ugly when you are upset.”

Number 3

Avoid absolutes—always, every time cannot be debated. It sets up a lost cause.

Saying, “You always do that” renders hopelessness and frustration.

Number 4

Use “I” statements— “I think....”... or “I feel”

We know the wisdom in using the first person. Using “I” statements avoids putting the other on defence.... And... it helps us own the issue as our problem.

Interestingly, Pilate, using “I” declarations, could not convict Jesus of a crime.

Also, we can also present our need and hope when we say “I”.

Number 5

If too intense, break off (declare a truce), but agree to resume at a set time.

Some people get very emotional in a conflict, and intense emotions sabotages reason and prudence.

Elevated emotions can be unnerving and force avoidance.

One could be tempted to just drop the discussion, but the conflict needs to be resolved or it will fester.

So, try to resume to resolve the issue in a healthy, mutually accepted manner.

Number 6

Respect feelings and intent. Neither wishes to do harm.

Try, try, try to assume there is no malaise / that the other is a good person and does not want to hurt you.

Also, using an “I” statement, remind the other person that you do not want to hurt them.

Number 7

Seek resolution. Confirm that the matter is settled/resolved.

This relates to number 5. Do not give up or hide.

Time restrictions do not allow an exploration about the forgiveness and healing process. It does take work.

Do be gentle and check to see if the other is content with the solution.

Number 8

One must never use or hint at using brute force.

I trust that this rule is obvious. Violence or the threat of violence must never be allowed.

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Sometimes, regardless of good intentions, a conflict can go off track and get stuck and be very emotional.

That is the reason for Number 9

If there is escalation and deep emotional wounds, get professional counselling.

Restoration, growth, and complete forgiveness is the goal,.... And hopefully there is new insight and revived compassion.

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To be sure, conflict is unavoidable and often necessary.

The Bible is full of stories about conflict, especially the New Testament.

In Luke 12, Jesus even said he came to bring division—conflict.

That statement followed Jesus long, disparaging criticism against the Religious leaders.

Please note, Jesus did Not create conflict; he simply helped to exposed it.

Suppressed, hidden conflict is dangerous and destructive.

Problems need to be solved, especially interpersonal problems.

Jesus ranted against the leaders’ unjust system. The system was destructive. The conflict already existed and was used to subjugate the masses. Jesus exposed it.

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In contrast, the ruling elite, the Pharisees, would conjure up a conflict to confront Jesus.

This is what happened in today's text.

This is a scandalous passage, and not just because it includes sex.

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I read from the New R.S.V. which came out in 1989, replacing the Revised Standard Version. The RSV did not contain this story / these verses. It is missing in a number of translations.

Most scholars agree that John did not write these verses and the placement does not fit the flow in John's narrative.

Some argue this episode fits better in Luke's account, after chapter 21, verse 38.

Yet, none of the early collections of the Gospels contain this story of the woman caught in adultery.

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Nevertheless, numerous early writers referred to it. Apparently, this interaction Jesus had with the leaders was shared and taught. The validity of the story is accepted.

The Gospel writers simply did not include it in their books.

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This text presents a fascinating and intriguing story.

Early in the morning, Jesus went to the temple and people gathered around him.

Jesus sat down, which was the position for teaching, and that was what he did.

A crowd of people is convenient if you want to cause a spectacle.

A group of religious leaders marched into the crowd to Jesus, pulling along a woman. Jesus stood up.

They made her stand before Jesus and everyone.

Pointing at her they declared, "This woman was caught in the very act of committing adultery."

They were setting a trap for Jesus.

The leaders said that Moses commanded that such a woman caught in such an act of sex MUST be stoned to death.

Confident of their trap, they asked Jesus, "What do you say?"

They knew Jesus had a reputation for kindness and grace.

Still, just like today, sex was elevated to extreme importance.

Bill Clinton was impeached for lying about his sexual encounter. Many politicians have fallen because of sexual trysts

Yet, George W. Bush promoted a lie to invade Iraq causing hundreds of thousands to die,.....and he was not even officially reprimanded. ???

Presenting the woman caught in the sexual act of adultery would have had the crowd on edge and looking for stones.

The leaders were likely hiding their satisfied smirk.

Jesus was faced with either disobeying Moses...or seem cruel and also break Roman law. Only the Romans could do capital punishment.

However, there is a deep sinister side to this story.

The law declared that two people were required to witness the forbidden act. Circumstantial evidence was not allowed.

Therefore, conviction was extremely rare.

People committing adultery tend to be very careful and secretive. Two people barging in was very unlikely.

This was obviously a setup.

We do not know why, but we do know that the woman was being exploited / abused. The religious leader regarded her a pawn and NOT as a person.

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Jesus did not say a thing. Instead, he bent down /stooped and wrote with his finger on the ground.

Maybe he wrote, "Where is the man?"

The Mosaic law they referred to, in Deuteronomy 22, states that both the man and woman must be stoned to death.

The absence of the man reveals their terrible misogyny.

Even so, they kept on harassing Jesus with questions. Maybe they were trying to rile the crowd and pressure Jesus.

Jesus calmly stood up and wisely asked,

"Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

Then he bent down again and wrote on the ground.

Things were intense, so the silent writing was like a peaceful diffuser. Jesus did not lash back at them or do a personal attack. He simply asked a question.

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With that question, Jesus forced them into the first-person frame of mind. They had to own the conflict they presented.

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One by one, they all went away leaving Jesus with the woman.

Jesus stood up to face her, not as a teacher, but as an equal.

Eye to eye, Jesus asked, "Has no one condemned you?"
She was given voice / power.

The woman replied, "No one."

To which Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and live a life without shame."

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Jesus ended the fabricated conflict by calmly allowing the injustice to be exposed and empowering the victim.

Jesus showed tenderness and intimacy with grace.

Oh, and Jesus did not even ask her about the sex.

It just was not that important.

There are other things far more important, including respect and humility.

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The theme these past four Sundays has been:

Pieced together by grace: nurturing healthy relationships in divided times.

There has always been the problem of polarity.

Now, the division is out in the open and enflamed.

We are in this conflict.

How do we respond?