

The ever present possibility of conflict is a reality of life. No matter how hard we might try to be good neighbors, or to be team players at work, we are going, from time to time, have disagreements with our peers, our subordinates and our superiors. That is just the way that human beings are. There will always be disagreement. A misconception about Christianity holds that a Christian is always meek and mild and quick to turn the other cheek. I don't know that there is anything particularly Christian about being a perpetual doormat for others to walk over. I'm certain that is not what Jesus meant when he said that we should turn the other cheek. There is something to going the extra mile to avoid conflict, though. If we can reduce the tension, calm the waters by being peacefully calm, and proactively striving to reduce the tension, we should. That is just common sense, but being a Christian does not mean being a doormat. We do not have to stand meekly while others do us wrong. So when disagreement occurs, how should a Christian react? Our Lord's answer to that is the theme of the gospel passage this morning. We can also quite profitably look to Paul's Letter to the Romans, from which we read today, to add to our understanding.

Our Lord's advice in this morning's gospel reading is very good advice. Jesus said that if someone mistreats you, or offends you, don't go after him with both barrels of your shotgun blazing. First, try to work it out by talking with the other person, privately. You might just salvage an old friendship or build a new one. Think about this. Our Lord's advice is very pragmatic and truly sound. If you make the conflict public, before you've quietly tried to settle it, you make it much more difficult for the other person to back down or change his behavior. He is exposed and will feel exposed, and therefore he will likely be defensive. Many believe that the best defense is a good offense, so if you don't want to set him off, stay calm and peaceful, give careful attention to his side of the story and try to talk it over. Try to work it out, and if you take Saint Paul's advice, as well as Jesus', to love your neighbor as you love yourself, recognizing that your actions should not be harmful because love does not wrong a neighbor, then you might very well work it out – unless you are dead wrong or your neighbor is excessively stubborn. A calm discussion clears a lot of air.

If you can't work it out, then consider what the Lord said next. Take your time, gather your evidence and witnesses. However, don't go public yet. Go back to your neighbor with your witnesses and try to reason with him; see if you can't still work it out. Only when all else has failed should you take more public and forceful action.

What is this all about and why so much ado about how to get along with difficult neighbors? It all comes back to the love ethic and our Lord's New commandment: "A new commandment I give you: love one another as I love you." This is what Saint Paul stressed in the Romans reading this morning. Love fulfills the Law of God; a loving person is a righteous person. To love your neighbor is to seek justice and righteousness, not victory. When justice and righteousness prevail, all win.

If you reduce Christian moral theology to its common denominator, you reduce it to the ethic of love. We cannot escape this, because the essence of Christianity is loved lived out. Some years ago, a medical school professor of ethics, Joseph Fletcher, stirred up a lot of controversy by saying that in any given situation, your moral obligation is the same: do the loving thing. This was quickly labeled "situation ethics" and broadly condemned by the religious community. Both Catholics and Evangelicals responded that Dr. Fletcher was throwing out the rule book and that with "situation ethics," anything goes. The problem was that those complaining did not listen to what Fletcher said. He said that we have a moral obligation to try our best to discern the most loving response in any given

situation, then having done our best to discern it, with courage act accordingly, because the only righteous guide for conduct is our Lord's commandment that we love others as he loves us. Dr. Fletcher was not only an ethicist; he was an ordained minister, an Episcopal priest. He understood the love ethic because he embraced our Lord's New Commandment.

If we take Christianity seriously, we understand that as baptized Christians we are called to discipleship. The best way to describe discipleship is to use the analogy of the German reformer, Martin Luther. Luther summed discipleship up this way: disciples are expected to be “a little Christ” to their neighbors. The way that you you are Christ to your neighbor is to do as Jesus did, so you must act in response to the self-addressed question, “What would Jesus do in this situation?” The answer will always be “The most loving thing.” *Amen.*