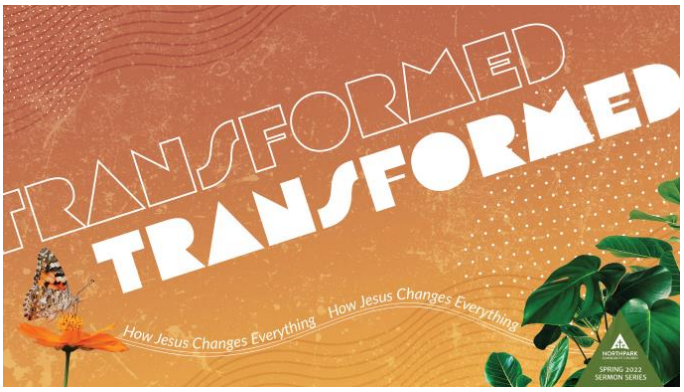

Date: May 22, 2022
Speaker: Paul McIlwraith
Transformed! How Jesus Changes Everything – Conflict

Blessed Peace Community Church is located in the small town of Forestview in Northern Ontario. The church has been in existence for over 125 years. It was a tight knit community but the population of the town has been growing steadily in recent years due to the active and healthy lifestyle available. A new ski hill has been built close to town so in the winter months there is downhill skiing and there are groomed trails for snowmobiling and cross country skiing. In the summer, there are plenty of lakes for fishing and water sports.

Forestview has a regional campus of Nipissing University from nearby North Bay and just opened a telecommunication centre for a large financial institution. They also have an injection molding factory nearby that is the town's main employer.

Due to these factors, a lot of younger people and families are moving into the area, overwhelming the older residents with the need for new schools and other services. Change is happening with some resistance. The growth of the town has also brought some challenges for Blessed Peace Church over the last few years.

Once a dwindling congregation, it has now grown to an average weekly attendance of 150 people and offers a full program for children, youth and adults. The ministry has expanded and has really stretched the church's physical and financial resources.

There is a growing young adults program that is being led by a relatively new member of the congregation, Jeff Rodriguez.

Jeff has attended the church less than two years but has established quite a connection with these young people in a short period of time.

The Pastor of Blessed Peace, Sarah Philips has been at the church for five years and now finds herself receiving a steady stream of complaints about this young adult ministry from the older members. They feel the younger people have taken over their space and are consuming budget money that could go to other programs. They also don't seem to respect the traditions of the church.

At a recent church meeting, Jeff Rodriguez made a request on behalf of the young adult's ministry that the church start another worship service. One that is a little more casual in nature and incorporates a more contemporary style of music. He said that he would take responsibility for finding the musicians and promoting this new service on behalf of the congregation.

Pastor Philips was taken off guard by this proposal and suggested the church form a task group to further study the feasibility of such an undertaking. Rodriguez objected to this idea and stated that if the church did not approve his request he would go to another church and take the young adults with him.

That is when the heated debate started. It brought to light all sorts of underlying issues that had been brewing for years such as lack of communication, differing of perspectives and resistance to change. Oh, no one opposed the proposal. There was more concern over the lack of respect demonstrated in the ultimatum that was given. The congregation wanted to support the young adult's ministry but resented feeling like they were held hostage.

In the subsequent weeks, people began to talk and take sides. Accusations began to fly. Sadly, nobody really knew what to do or how to resolve the conflict that was beginning to split the church and hinder their Christian influence in the town that they had been a part of for over 100 years.

That is a dismal tale, isn't it? Fortunately, I made it up. There is no Blessed Peace Community Church in Forestview, Ontario. At least I don't think so. Unfortunately, although these places don't exist, the scenario is real for many churches, today. Perhaps you have been a part of one where unresolved

conflict and infighting has decimated relationships and tarnished the name of Jesus in the community.

The consequences of unresolved conflict in the church are disastrous. A small argument can grow into a tug of war, power struggle that rips the church apart. From personality differences, pride, passive aggressive behavior to theological differences, lack of communication or even the colour of the paint on the walls or the positioning of the drum kit on the stage, the causes and reasons for discord in the church are as diverse as the people involved in them.

Internal conflict is one of the main reasons why people leave the church and in some cases, never return. To any church.

Conflict can be handled well however, if we have a fundamental understanding of the nature of conflict and maybe more significantly as Christians, we remember who were are in Christ. Have I piqued your interest a little?

If you missed last week, we are in the second week of a message series at North Park Fanshawe that we have entitled, *Transformed. How Jesus Changes Everything.*

Last week as we introduced the series, we were reminded that the early disciples of Jesus went from falling asleep on Him on the eve of his crucifixion when He really needed them, to leading a movement of God that changed the course of human history. What happened? Transformation.

They had an encounter with the resurrected Jesus and it changed everything. It changed the way that they lived, their perspective and values. It changed everything and we were challenged by the question, *has Jesus changed everything for us?* Is the way that we are living different that the way the rest of the world lives?

It should be because we have the Holy Spirit in our lives as followers of Jesus.

> ***Romans 8:11***
> *The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you.*

As we discovered in Romans 12 last week, the Holy Spirit changes the way that we think. It gives us the mind of Christ which is often opposed to the world that lives to a different standard.

> ***1 John 2:6***
> *Those who say they live in God should live their lives as Jesus did.*

> ***2 Corinthians 5:17***
> *This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!*

Through Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we are transformed but, it is an ongoing process. It should effect the way that we live and engage with others. It should impact the way that we handle our resources, the way we think about power and privilege and the way that we handle conflict.

As Christians, the way that we maneuvered through all of those things should draw people closer to Jesus rather than away.

How many of you are conflict avoiders? Most of us are. I include myself in this group. Conflict avoidance is a type of people pleasing behaviour that is usually rooted in a fear of disappointing or upsetting others. It is about being overly concerned of what people think of you. So we avoid conflict at all costs.

The tension with that type of thinking is that it is really hard to skate through life without conflict. Can I ask you to do something else for me? Take your pulse. Can you feel it? Good. That means that you are living and breathing. If you are living and breathing and have to engage in our world in any sort of meaningful way, you will have conflict.

Conflict is not bad. Repeat that with me, CONFLICT IS NOT BAD. It is how we go about resolving it that can make it good or bad. In fact, it is possible to have conflict with a person and feel closer to them and more connected because of the way you worked through it.

Has anyone ever taken a conflict resolution course? The fact is that most of us have never been taught how to properly resolve our conflicts so do you know what we default to? What we have seen

modelled for us by our parents in the homes we have been raised.

No offense to parents but most of us don't know how to resolve conflict properly either because we are just doing what we saw our parents do who also didn't have a clue.

Or, we are influenced by what we see and hear on social media or TV shows like CNN and FOX NEWS and all their mud slinging and as a result, we, in Canada in 2022 have become a pretty angry, divided and hostile nation.

I think that is what we have observed as we have tried to find our way through the COVID-19 pandemic.

The emotion and unsettledness has given rise to things like the Freedom Convoys which has stirred a lot of emotion on both sides.

What has been instilled in us is that people can not disagree and still be in community with each other. Instead, we go our separate ways and bicker about one another. We view conflict as someone has to win and someone has to lose and so, we do all that we can to ensure that we are the ones who win.

Which includes, shaming, name calling, blaming and berating and although it may feel like we get the upper hand and win the argument, in the end it just leaves us empty and disillusioned. Think of the last conflict you had with someone. How was it resolved and how did it make you feel?

What if I told you there could be another way?

Would it surprise you to know that the Bible speaks a lot about conflict? In fact, that story about Blessed Peace Community Church that I shared with you at the beginning of the message is loosely based on a real life biblical story found in the book of Acts.

> ***Acts 6:1***
> *But as the believers rapidly multiplied, there were rumblings of discontent. The Greek-speaking believers complained about the Hebrew-speaking believers, saying that their widows were being discriminated against in the daily distribution of food.*

Does it sound vaguely familiar? Conflict in the church because of two competing factions.

Not the older people and the younger people like at Blessed Peace church in my story but here in Acts 6, we have the Greek speaking Christians and the Hebrew speaking Christians in the church at odds with one another.

The number of people coming to faith and attending the church in this day was rapidly increasing, which is good but with growth comes the possibility of differing opinions and conflicts.

The Greek speaking Christians in Acts 6 didn't feel their widows were being treated the same as the Hebrew speaking widows in the daily distribution of food, which was a huge ministry in this day in the church. Feeding the widows.

There were even accusations of discrimination and favouritism. Now we are not given more details but we can assume that there was heated debate, lack of communication, misunderstanding, gossip and people taking sides just like the situation at Blessed Peace.

So look at how the leadership responded in **Acts 6:2.** The twelve, the apostles. The guys whose lives had been transformed by Jesus

> *(So the Twelve)called a meeting of all the believers.*

They called a church wide meeting. They got everyone together in one place to work through the differences. Now again, we are not given all the details but we can assume that they listened to the allegations and then came to a resolution.

> ***Acts 6:2-4***
> *They said, "We apostles should spend our time teaching the word of God, not running a food program.*
>
> *And so, brothers, select seven men who are well respected and are full of the Spirit and wisdom.*

We will give them this responsibility. Then we apostles can spend our time in prayer and teaching the word."

The apostles realized they could not solve the problem by taking on more responsibility themselves. They already had the important task of preaching and teaching the word of God and prayer.

So the suggestion was made that seven wise and respected men, full of the Spirit could take on the task of ensuring that the ministry of feeding all the widows was done with love and fairness.

Everyone was listened to and everyone respected. Everyone was involved in working towards an amicable solution and in the end, the conflict actually drew the community together rather than tearing them apart.

Acts 6:5
Everyone liked this idea,

Conflicted Resolved. Crisis averted. In fact, look at the impact the way this church handled this conflict had on the community.

Acts 6:7
So God's message continued to spread. The number of believers greatly increased in Jerusalem, and many of the Jewish priests were converted, too.

The way this first century church in Acts worked through their issue with love and respect and with the help of the Holy Spirit caused many to be drawn to Jesus.

Hear me on this. We look for all sorts of ways and strategies for how we can reach our neighbourhoods and communities for Jesus, don't we? We spend all sorts of money on programs and spend hours in training seminars on how to share the gospel.

Many of us are on our knees regularly praying for the salvation of our friends, family and neighbours. We are passionate about them getting to know Jesus, am I right?

What if I told you that the greatest evangelistic tool we have at our disposal for how to demonstrate the love of Jesus to the world around us, is the way we treat each other?

The way we love each other and work through our differences in a respectful and God honouring way.

If we got that one right, we would have people beating down the doors to get into this place. Think about that. The impact we would have on our community if they saw us demonstrate loving kindness to one another even when we disagree.

We see other examples of conflict in Scripture.

In the midst of His last supper with His closest followers- just before His crucifixion, Jesus' disciples get into a brouhaha. (I have always wanted to work that into a sermon, brouhaha). The reason?

Luke 22:24
Then they began to argue among themselves about who would be the greatest among them.

Jesus is spilling His heart to them about what He is about to endure and they are squabbling amongst themselves, "*Which one of us is the best?!"*

Ridiculous and insensitive, right? How could they do such a thing. Until we realize that the situation that causes the most turmoil and conflict in families today is, does anyone know? It is bickering over a dead relative's estate before their body is even cold.

Estate planners tell us that almost every family has some level of tension percolating just below the surface as family inheritance issues are addressed and everyone is posturing to get their fair share.

So, we can't be too hard on the disciples here when they are arguing about some silly issue on the eve of Jesus' death, can we?

A third conflict that appears in the Bible actually occurs between two of the most prominent church leaders in the New Testament. Peter and Paul. In Galatians 2, we read about their very public conflict in Anitoch.

Galatians 2:12
But when Peter came to Antioch, I had to oppose him to his face, for what he did was very wrong.

What is the source of their conflict? Paul was concerned that Peter was living out his faith not with sincerity but more out of concern for what people thought and as a result, he was leading some more impressionable Christians astray.

So Paul calls him on it and although it was awkward, messy and uncomfortable, the way both of these men worked through this conflict actually brought them closer together. In **2 Peter 3:15**, Peter calls Paul, his *beloved brother.*

So, you can see that the Bible does address how we as followers of Jesus are to work through conflict in a way that honours him and honours and respects one another.

It is only truly possible when we approach it with the mind of Christ. When we rely on the wisdom and discernment of the Holy Spirit in us as those whose lives have been transformed by the resurrected Jesus. Can we do that?

This is where I want to get really practical. Let's use the second half of this message to share a few practical steps that we as Christians should take as we seek to resolve conflict in a Godly way.

Step #1 Invite Jesus into the Conflict.

In James 4, the author gets to the root cause of what causes conflict amongst people.

James 4:1-2
What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don't they come from the evil desires at war within you?

You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it.

Conflict is a heart issue and the only remedy for a corrupt heart is Jesus. We need to invite Jesus into all of our relationships and all of our conflicts to help us resolve them in an expedient and Godly way.

Are you dealing with a conflict right now? Have you prayed about it? Have you invited Jesus into it to give you guidance and direction on how to move forward in resolving it? Have you asked God to prepare the heart of the person you are in the conflict with to work towards a positive resolution?

That is what differentiates us from the rest of the world, we have Jesus at our disposal. Why would we not tap into His power in us as we work through difficult situations?

Step #2 Resolve Conflict in a Timely Way.

There is a passage in Scripture that gets recited often around this topic of conflict. It may even be misused at times but listen to what it says.

Ephesians 4:22-26
throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life, which is corrupted by lust and deception. Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. Put on your new nature, created to be like God—truly righteous and holy…And "don't sin by letting anger control you." Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry,

I love how this passage reminds us that we have been transformed by the Holy Spirit and that affects the way that we live in so many ways specifically in regards to the way we handle anger. Anger can lead to so much conflict.

"Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry." Have you heard this verse before? Perhaps you live your life by it. This passage is not necessarily meant to be taken literally, like don't go to bed angry as much it's an encouragement to resolve your conflicts in a timely way.

When Carolyn and I were first married, it was drilled into us, don't go to bed angry so that if a conflict came up before bed time, we would stay up until the wee hours of the night trying to work it through.

We quickly discovered, that was not productive. She was tired. I was tired. She was grumpy and I was grumpy and we actually found instead of resolving the conflict, it got blown more out of proportion. So now, we have learned to *set ourselves up for success.*

We try and set a time and place where we can address the problem in a timely way but also where we are both relatively refreshed and can focused on the conflict at hand.

Does that make sense? Now that doesn't mean we never stay up into the wee hours trying to work something through. There may be a need for that at times but there is a benefit for taking some time and space to process things first.

This past week, I was invited to sit with two people who were having some difficulty in their relationship and they had taken a few weeks to just clear their heads and then were ready to engage with one another again.

While we were in Ireland for the family wedding, Carolyn had a great conversation with an old family friend. He ended up apologizing to her.

Perplexed Carolyn asked what for. It seems that he had been weighed down for years by the way that he had treated her when she was a 13-year-old. He was a friend of Carolyn's older brother and he has teased her a lot when she was a teen. Carolyn hadn't given it a second thought but it had been had been on this guy's mind and so after 45 years, he asked for her forgiveness.

It is never too late. Perhaps you have had a conflict that has remained unresolved for years and it continues to gnaw at you. It is never too late, but the goal should always be to resolve the conflict in a timely way.

Step #3 Check Your Heart.

I want to go back to this one I mentioned briefly a few minutes ago. Conflict is often a heart issue. So how is your heart?

In his classic book, *The Gulag Archipelago*, Author Alexsandr Solzhenitsyn famously said,

"The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart

Overwhelmed with his sin after committing adultery with Bathsheba, King David cries out to God.

> ***Psalm 51:10***
> *Create in me a clean heart, O God.*

As we learned last week, the key to Christian transformation is inviting God to changing the way that we think which leads to a changed heart. We are new creations. God is in the business of making all things new.

If you find yourselves in a situation today where you feel because of some unresolved conflict or tension that you have a bitter heart, take heart.

God can chip away at the hard shell you have built up around it and make it new. That's His transformative work in your life when you turn to Him.

Colossians 3 in the New Testament describes some attributes that we are to invite the Holy Spirit to cultivate in our lives to have a heart that aligns with Jesus.

These qualities should be evident in the way we deal with those in our church community and those in the world around us.

> ***Colossians 3:12-17***
> *Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Make allowance for each other's faults, and forgive anyone who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony.*
>
> *And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are called to live in peace. And always be thankful…And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord*

Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father.

Imagine if these qualities defined our lives. The way that we resolved conflict would draw us closer to one another and be a practical demonstration of the love and unity of Jesus to the world.

Let's take a minute to look at some of the qualities listed. "*Since God chose you to be the holy people he loves, you must clothe yourselves with* ***tenderhearted mercy****, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.*"

1. **Tenderhearted Mercy/Compassion.**

To be compassionate means to be deeply moved by the state of another person. In order to be moved by someone, we have to take time to understand their condition, perspective or lot in life.

It means being willing to listen first and then speak. It means trying to understand how that person may have been hurt by the conflict they have with you. But that is hard and so counter culture, right?

We want to defend. We want to be heard. We want our feelings known and validated.

Here's the thing, a sign of spiritual transformation is to be the first to lay aside your feelings, in order to listen to someone else's. That is compassion.

2. **Kindness**

We have talked about this before but one thing COVID-19 has demonstrated is that we live in a world that is more and more forgetting how to be kind to one another. Kindness is simply, compassion in action.

Are we capable of demonstrating with our actions, even though we are in the midst of a conflict with someone, that we still love and care for them and want the best for them? Nothing can escalate a fight more quickly than a flippant eye roll, or shrug or sigh. Believe me, I know.

Being kind means being sensitive with your words and actions. It demonstrates that resolving the situation really matters to you.

3. **Humility**

Humility is action without regard for acknowledgement.

As I said earlier, many of us enter into conflict with the mentality, someone has to win and someone has to lose, so I am going to win! So, we create a battle plan that is ruthless.

So we launch verbal grenade after verbal grenade and the collateral damage is devastating to the relationship. The whole exchange becomes about assigning blame and fault rather than seeking to understand and building one another up.

Humility in a relationship is seen in things like dying to your need to be right, getting in the last word or say, "*I told you so*" but instead go lower, acknowledge your role in the conflict and model Christ.

4. **Gentleness**

Gentleness is action received as help, not as condemnation. It's tenderness and in conflict it is revealed in the way that we choose our words. Gentleness is not inflammatory. It doesn't add fuel to the fire. It deescalates by ensuring the words we use are not meant to hurt, blame or accuse.

No matter how angry or frustrated we feel, using words that puts a person on the defensive hardly ever leads to a productive resolution. YOU NEVER LISTEN TO ME! What does that do? It drives a person back in their seat doesn't it? It drives them away.

But if we switched it around and instead say, "*I feel like I haven't been heard,*" what does that do? It draws a person forward, like they want to hear more and work towards a resolution.

We have the ability to accurately convey our experiences of angst gently without having to try and intentionally hurt others. Do you understand that?

5. **Patience**

Patience allows us to continue to work through a difficult situation even when it doesn't appear to be coming to a resolution.

All we have to do is think about how much God loves us, how much he puts up with us and that helps us to be a little bit more forgiving and patient with people around us.

Being compassionate, kind, humble, gentle and patient in the midst of a conflict can be incredibly difficult. This is not easy stuff, but remember, we don't go it alone. The Holy Spirit is at work in us, refining these qualities and helping us to resolve conflict in a positive way and remember love.

"Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds us all together in perfect harmony."

Let me give you one last step that helps in resolving conflict. Note, this is not an exhaustive list. There may be more steps but this is a beginning.

Step #4 Take another person with you.

There may be times when you are in a difficult situation with someone and you have just reached a stalemate. You haven't felt heard or understood. They have not felt heard and understood.

It is at times like this that you may need to invite another person in as a bit of an impartial mediator to help you both to understand the perspective of the other.

That is not a cop out, it is the spiritually mature thing to do. In Matthew 18 Jesus himself teaches His followers about bringing another person into a conflict to help work to a resolution. That is something you may need to consider.

There you have four practical steps that we, as Christians, our lives transformed by Jesus should take as we seek to resolve conflict in a Godly way.

1. ***Invite Jesus into the Conflict.***

2. ***Resolve Conflict in a Timely Way.***

3**. *Check Your Heart*:** for qualities such as Compassion, Kindness, Humility, Gentleness, Patience

4. ***Take another person with you.***

I am still working on how to resolve conflict in a productive way.

I know what you are thinking but Paul, "*what if I am willing to take all these steps and the person I am in conflict with, isn't?*" That is tough for sure but I don't think it changes our approach.

In the way that we engage with others, we seek the mind of Christ including in the way that we resolve conflict. Through the Holy Spirit at work in us, transforming our lives, we can work through our difficulties in a more productive way that grows our character, strengthens our relationships with others and is a testimony to the world of the love and grace of Jesus. **Amen? Amen.**

Transformed!

How Jesus Changes Everything.

Conflict

May 22, 2022

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Have you ever been involved in a church that has had a major conflict that has affected the congregation? Without sharing the details of names etc., describe how the conflict was mishandled and the ramifications to the church and the community.

2. Are you a conflict avoider? Why do you think most people avoid conflict? How does this behaviour negatively affect the relationships we are in?

3. Have you ever taken a conflict resolution course? If not, where did you learn how to resolve conflict? Describe the approach you take to resolving a conflict between you and a friend or family member? What are the things that seem to work well and what doesn't work as well in your approach?

4. Do you make it a regular practice to invite Jesus into your conflicts? If so, how has inviting him to give you the wisdom and guidance to resolve things worked in a productive way?

5. Do you tend to delay resolving conflict because it is too uncomfortable to deal with or do you need to resolve things right away? Why is it important to resolve conflict in a timely way?

6. Do you intentionally "check your heart" before you resolve a conflict with someone? What difference does having compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience make in working through a problem with someone? Have you been on the receiving end of someone demonstrating these qualities towards you and it has softened your heart towards this person? Explain.

7. How do you think the way that we as Christians resolve conflict with one another impacts our testimony to the world?

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Pray for God's wisdom and guidance in a conflict you may be experiencing with someone, currently. Invite Him to give you the opportunity to resolve that situation in a timely and productive way.