

Courage Under Fire

A sermon preached at Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time, July 13, 1997.
Scripture Lessons: 2 Samuel 6:1-5, 12b-19; Psalm 24; Ephesians 1:2-14; Mark 6:14-29.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Last week I received an advertisement for a new book for ministers. The title of the book is Clergy Killers: Guidance for Pastors... Under Attack. At first I thought it was a biographical study of clergy killers like whoever killed Dr. Martin Luther King. I was wrong. The author, Dr. Lloyd Rediger, presents research data documenting the growing phenomenon of abused pastors. Sometimes they suffer so much abuse that their life ends prematurely. In the book he discusses why and how this type of conflict arises. We've all heard about abused children, abused parents, and abused senior citizens. Now we can add clergy to our growing list of abused people. I didn't buy the book. I don't feel abused. For the most part I feel very much loved by you. But if this book had been published 2000 years ago I would have recommended it to John the Baptist.

King Herod was a clergy killer. Mark tells us that conflict arose between Herod and John because of his preaching. Herod had committed adultery by seducing his half-brother, Philip's wife, Herodias and then marrying her. John the Baptist publicly condemned Herod for what he did. "It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife." he said. His preaching not only caused conflict in the royal household, it prompted Herod to settle his private domestic conflict with his wife by having John arrested and thrown into prison.

Everybody is against sin in general. And nobody minds if the preacher condemns the sins of other people. In fact we kind of

enjoy it. Preachers often hear people comment at the door after the worship service, "I wish my wife (husband) could have heard that sermon." Preaching about other people's sins is what we preachers are supposed to do. Some of you may have seen the Frank and Ernest cartoon that appeared in the paper several years ago. Frank and Ernest are leaving a worship service. They've just shaken hands with the minister and are on the way. Frank turns to Ernest and says gleefully, "Boy! Did he ever have your number today!" John the Baptist really had King Herod's number. John's preaching caused such a conflict between John and the royal household that John ended up getting killed.

In the publicity for Rediger's book, Clergy Killers, Lyle Schaller, a parish consultant recommends the book this way. He says, "~~The victims of this syndrome (clergy-abuse) can read this~~ book to discover what really happened to them - and how to keep it from happening again." Somehow I don't think the book would have helped John the Baptist. The desire to reduce conflict was not high on of John the Baptist's list of priorities.

Now all of us have conflict in our lives, some greater some less. And we all have our preferred ways of dealing with conflict. A woman said, "I'm under tremendous pressure from my teenage son these days. We can't be in the same room for ten minutes without some kind of conflict arising. Sometimes I feel like killing him." A husband said, "My wife and I have gotten along pretty well for years but it seems like we're experiencing more and more conflict over the last several years. I don't believe in divorce but sometimes I feel like killing her." A business woman said, "I come

home from every day with a tension headache because of all the infighting and backbiting at work. It's killing me." Conflict is not only a clergy killer. Unresolved conflict, or conflict dealt with in the wrong way, can be killing.

When we become engaged in a conflict we have two major concerns. The first concern is achieving personal goals. Conflicts arise when we have a goal that conflicts with another person's goal. I want to go see *Men in Black* and Kay wants to see *The Mirror Has Two Faces*. The second concern we have when we become involved in a conflict is the concern most of us have in keeping a good relationship with the other person. We love our wives and husbands, children, friends and coworkers so we want to resolve our conflicts. We don't like living in a home rife with conflict. We want to live together in harmony.

How important our personal goals are to us and how important the relationship is to us affects how we act in a conflict. Given these two concerns, someone has come up with five styles of managing conflicts. I'll use the names of animals to identify these five styles of managing conflict.

First is the Turtle. Turtles withdraw into their shells to avoid conflicts. They avoid issues that lead to conflict. They avoid people they're in conflict with. John the Baptist was not a turtle.

Next there's the Teddy Bear. Relationships mean everything to Teddy Bears. Teddy Bears are willing to give up their personal goals in order to maintain a relationship. Women or men who are Teddy Bears will endure the worst kinds of physical and emotional

abuse to maintain a relationship with a spouse. John the Baptist was no Teddy Bear.

Third is the fox. Foxes are compromisers. They're willing to give up part of their goals and persuade the other person in a conflict to give up part of their goals. John the Baptist was no compromiser.

Fourth is the Owl. Owls highly value both their own goals and relationships. They view conflicts as problems to be solved and seek a solution that achieves both their own goals and the goals of the other person in the conflict. Owls are not satisfied until a solution is found that achieves their own goals and the other person's goals. They're not satisfied until the tensions and negative feelings have been fully resolved. John the Baptist was no owl.

Finally there's the shark. Sharks try to overpower opponents by forcing them to accept their solution to the conflict. Their goals are highly important to them and relationships are of minor importance. They seek to achieve their goals at all costs. They don't care if other people like or accept them. Sharks assume that conflicts are settled by one person winning and the other losing. They want to win, but they're also willing to lose. John the Baptist was a shark. He had no great concern about maintaining a close relationship with Herod or Herodias. His great and all encompassing goal was God's Law.

John's strategy of dealing with conflict isn't all bad. Sometimes we need to ignore conflict. Sometimes we need to compromise. ^{But} Sometimes we need to stand up and speak out like John,

let the chips fall where they may. John Calvin said (as quoted by Allan Boesak): "Christians always have to be in a certain sense disturbers of the established order, because they have to point out, explicitly or implicitly, the unfairness and injustice of the society in which they find themselves, while they seriously take up the Word of God and live according to it."

> Courage under fire: Denzel Washington (Col. Sterling) ... Conflict ...

Commander Officer - Gen. ... wants him to lie about the events surrounding death of

We often find it difficult not to compromise our integrity in the face of sin and evil. Sometimes we need to speak out at a

union meeting or at a Parent-teachers meeting or in a congregational meeting or at Presbytery^{or at a community meeting.} It takes the moral

strength of a John the Baptist not to allow self-interest alone to prevail. Most of us are weaker than he.... Often, too, we remain

silent when simple justice demands that we speak out against evil.

And if John got killed in his conflict with Herod, what hope is

there for us as we struggle against evil in the world and in

ourselves. Our hope is in Christ to whom John the Baptist pointed

and who shares his victory with us.

Let us pray:

Captain Walker...

Threatened, Pressured, Threatened with court martial, shame, disgrace...