

From Conflict to Community

Part 3, Genesis 39:1-23

Introduction

Today we continue our series from conflict to community, we know this is an important series because conflict impacts all our lives at some point. As Cliff said last week, we are all broken, and we all have the capacity to be part of conflict and to be impacted by conflict. However the good news is that there is a lot that can be done, there is a lot in the gospel of Jesus about how we can move from conflict to community. In the beginning of this series we noted that there are two types of conflict. There is the general conflict experience in which we play a part and then there is the other kind of conflict in which one person is virtually an innocent party being targeted because of someone else's issues. In today's episode we see Joseph becoming the victim of this second type of conflict.

Genesis 39:1-23 (NIV)

¹ Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there.

² The LORD was with Joseph and he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master. ³ When his master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD gave him success in everything he did, ⁴ Joseph found favor in his eyes and became his attendant. Potiphar put him in charge of his household, and he entrusted to his care everything he owned.

⁵ From the time he put him in charge of his household and of all that he owned, the LORD blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph. The blessing of the LORD was on everything Potiphar had, both in the house and in the field.

⁶ So he left in Joseph's care everything he had; with Joseph in charge, he did not concern himself with anything except the food he ate. Now Joseph was well-built and handsome, ⁷ and after a while his master's wife took notice of Joseph and said, "Come to bed with me!"

⁸ But he refused. "With me in charge," he told her, "my master does not concern himself with anything in the house; everything he owns he has entrusted to my care.

⁹ No one is greater in this house than I am. My master has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" ¹⁰ And though she spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her.

¹¹ One day he went into the house to attend to his duties, and none of the household servants was inside. ¹² She caught him by his cloak and said, "Come to bed with me!" But he left his cloak in her hand and ran out of the house. ¹³ When she saw that he had left his cloak in her hand and had run out of the house, ¹⁴ she called her household servants. "Look," she said to them, "this Hebrew has been brought to us to make sport of us! He came in here to sleep with me, but I screamed.

¹⁵ When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house." ¹⁶ She kept his cloak beside her until his master came home.

¹⁷ Then she told him this story: "That Hebrew slave you brought us came to me to

make sport of me. ¹⁸ But as soon as I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran out of the house."

¹⁹ When his master heard the story his wife told him, saying, "This is how your slave treated me," he burned with anger.

²⁰ Joseph's master took him and put him in prison, the place where the king's prisoners were confined. But while Joseph was there in the prison, ²¹ the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison warden. ²² So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. ²³ The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did.

Joseph, trying to make the best of his new life as a slave, finds himself the recipient of unwanted and inappropriate advances by the lady of the house and when he does the right thing, and rebuffs her advances, she turns on him, falsely accusing Joseph of trying to molest her. So Joseph, who probably thought that nothing could be worse than being a slave, ends up in prison, and not a reasonably clean prison with reasonable food, activities and a TV, but a dark, dirty, stinking, windowless prison where hopeless souls go to die.

The amazing part of this story is that Joseph does not respond to this dire situation in the normal way people respond, either with terrible rage at the injustice of it all or with terrible despair at the hopelessness of it all. Instead Joseph responds by making the best of a terrible situation and our only clue as to how he manages that are found in the statement; *"the LORD was with him; he showed him kindness and granted him favour in the eyes of the prison warden"* (Genesis 39:21). You see, Joseph has two things helping him deal with the terrible situation into which conflict has landed him, his faith-filled character and his spiritual gift.

Spiritual resources for dealing with conflict

1. Faith-filled Character

Firstly, Joseph's faith-filled character gives him the capacity to recognise the presence and hand of God, even in the darkness and gloom of prison. We can trace the source of this faith to Joseph's youth where in a dream he was touched with the belief that God had a plan and purpose for his life. So when Joseph's circumstances go pair-shaped, his faith rises up, reminding him, that even in the darkest place he is not alone, that he has hope and a future (Jeremiah 29:11). Faith gives us resilience and flexibility in the face of difficulty, but it has to rise up in us. Our faith can't be packed away in a memory box somewhere, it needs to be something that we constantly access and interact with when we deal with life situations. Our faith needs to be completely part of our character and if there is one thing that God wants to do in our lives it is to grow faith-filled characters. When Martin Luther King said he looked forward to the day when all Americans would be judged solely *"by the content of their character,"* he was talking about the essential qualities people bring to the business of their lives. Now the relationship between conflict and character can be seen in the following.

Fierce characters – argue – and escalate conflict
Fragile characters – avoid – and extend conflict
Faith-filled characters – adapt – and ease conflict

What God is seeking to do is transform our characters from fierce and fragile to faith-filled. Paul the apostle describes this transformation in his letter to the Philippians where he confesses that he was once a very fierce character.

⁴ though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. (Philippians 3:4-6)

Then Paul describes the dramatic change that Jesus has made to his character.

⁷ But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ. (Philippians 3:7-8)

Like Joseph this development of a faith-filled character made Paul incredibly resilient and incredibly adaptable.

Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. (1 Corinthians 9:19)

Knowing how important developing a faith-filled character is, Paul seeks to develop this quality in others. For example Paul trained Timothy for leadership in the church but Timothy had something of a fragile character and from the letters that Paul wrote to Timothy we get the picture of a shy young man who allowed people who were older and louder to push him to the back of the bus. To help Timothy deal with the conflict that was pushing him around, Paul encourages him in two ways, firstly to let his faith rise to the centre stage of his character.

¹² Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity. (1 Timothy 4:12)

2. Spiritual Gifts

But then secondly, Paul encourages Timothy to rely on his spiritual gifts to bring him through.

⁶ For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. ⁷ For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. (2 Timothy 1:6-7)

This was also true of Joseph. God gave Joseph the Spiritual gift of leadership. When Joseph was young, God gifted him with dreams of people submitting to his leadership and we see Joseph's best defence against conflict and trouble was living through his spiritual gift. As a slave in the house of Potiphar, Joseph demonstrated his gift of Leadership to his master and was eventually placed in charge of Potiphar's entire household. As a prisoner, Joseph impressed the prison warder with his gift of Leadership:

²² So the warden put Joseph in charge of all those held in the prison, and he was made responsible for all that was done there. ²³ The warden paid no attention to anything under Joseph's care, because the LORD was with Joseph and gave him success in whatever he did. (Genesis 39:22-23)

Our Spiritual gifts are our best spiritual resource to meet any challenge. My primary spiritual gift is prayer, and time and again when I have gone to God because I've been in conflict with someone and I've wanted to strangle them, prayer has been the place where the journey from conflict to community has begun. As I bring conflict to God in prayer I find that my heart changes from fierce to faith-filled and my attitude shifts for the better. I also find that in prayer God helps me develop strategies that really help in conflict situations. There have also been a couple of occasions in prayer that God has said that there was nothing I could do, and has counselled me to ride it out and promised that it would pass, and it did, even though I didn't think it would.

All the spiritual gifts are useful in dealing with conflict because the heart of God's Holy Spirit is a spirit of unity, a power seeking to bring people together into community.

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:3)

Just another example, Romans 12 mentions the spiritual gift of mercy (Romans 12:8) in which a person is filled with the compassion of God for others. In exercising their mercy gift people can often touch the hearts of people lost in conflict when arguments, threats and pleading have all failed. I remember being in a church meeting where we were discussing a change to one of our ministries and one of the men in the group was becoming really angry and being in conflict with just about every-one else. However one of the people in this group was a beautiful man named Peter, he had an incredible mercy gift, a really supernatural compassion that touched everyone he came in contact with him. So, when things had got really hot and difficult Peter leaned forward, touched the arm of our angry brother and looking into his face he said with a voice filled with compassion, "*What are you afraid of*". This instantly changed the whole tone of the discussion. Our angry brother stopped in mid tirade, took a couple of deep breaths and then spoke of how much the ministry had meant to him over the years and how he was afraid that the changes might mean there was no longer a place for people like him. Others responded to his sudden vulnerability with a much gentler and understanding tone and we became community again and the issues were resolved.

Just a bit of an aside, if this little foray into Spiritual gifts has piqued your interest, next month we are going to preach on spiritual gifts in greater detail as well as run a workshop in the last two Tuesdays of May to help people identify their spirituals gifts and grow in their use.

So now it's your turn, where are you on the conflict to community spectrum? Doing well or are there some people who you keep having conflict with? Your two greatest assets are your faith and your Spiritual gifts, let's spend some time in prayer seeking God, looking for our faith and our Spiritual gifts to rise up in the places where we need them.