

You Fight All the Time

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Philippians 2:1-13

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When I was in divinity school, I worked for two years as the parish administrator and the bookkeeper of another Christ Church, this one in New Haven, Connecticut. Some of you, who may know New Haven, may well know the church. It sits across from the row of shops adjacent to the Yale bookstore, on Broadway, which is – as in many other cities – one of the busier streets in town. There is a great deal of auto traffic, and plenty of foot traffic as well.

One evening, I was locking up the gate on the Broadway side of the campus, which required a great deal of fiddling with the lock. While I was deep in my task, a youngish man, dressed in a pair of overalls and sporting a studiously unkempt beard, approached from the north, moving quickly. Without breaking stride, he hissed at me:

You fight all the time. Jesus is a myth.

And then he walked away.

I actually found this very unsettling. I didn't recognize him, and to my knowledge, I hadn't done anything to him. Maybe it was the speed with which he approached and disappeared, like a hipster apparition. Maybe it was his quiet, sibilant vitriol that put me off balance. But the more I thought of it, the more I was disconcerted by the incisive way in which he inserted his verbal knife, just between the church's ribs:

You fight all the time. Jesus is a myth.

As Christians, we do indeed fight all the time, and that's not limited to the great theological divides separating the Western Church from the East, or Anglicans from Roman Catholics, or the Greek Orthodox, who are certain that they tower above everybody else. In the many churches with which I've been associated over the years, there has always been a lot of fighting. People have disagreed about the music and the liturgy and politics and whose event received more column-inches in the newsletter and even the color of the paint. I remember to this day the furore that erupted when someone re-painted the doors of the church in which I

grew up.¹ They had been red for as long as anyone could remember. One day, without discussion or notice, they became something closer to a dark lavender. You can imagine what happened next.

And yet, “If there is any encouragement in Christ,” St Paul writes in our Epistle this morning, “any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.”

Does that sound like a pipe dream to you? How can Paul possibly say that? People just don’t have the same mind, or the same love, and they are seldom in full accord. It’s tempting to imagine that things were different back in Paul’s day, when things were simpler, when Christians didn’t have church doors to paint, but of course that’s just nonsense and nostalgia. If you read Paul’s letters to the various churches scattered around the Mediterranean, you’ll see that there was infighting and disagreement about all kinds of things. St Paul at one stage even got himself into a messy public fight with St Peter, about who was sitting with whom and who was a member of which faction.²

Let’s go back to the street in New Haven. *You fight all the time. Jesus is a myth.* Here in my manuscript, I have those written out as two complete sentences, separated by a period, but I see now that that has been a syntactical error on my part, since those are two causally connected ideas. They should be joined by a colon. It should be, *You fight all the time: [colon, therefore] Jesus is a myth.*

In our nonbelieving age, there is no shortage of reasons why secular onlookers might suggest that the Christian faith is all bunk. Perhaps the miracles are unbearably far-fetched. I have some atheistical friends who can’t get behind the virgin birth. For others, the physical resurrection is just a bridge too far. As a result of this, the church often tends to downplay the proclamation of Christ, and him crucified, in favor of language about “vibrant” and “welcoming” and “inclusive” human communities. And yet as we have heard, no church can possibly live up to this promise. “All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”³ You fight all the time.

And I think that if we go back to our Epistle this morning, we will see that St Paul does not in fact hang the church’s hopes on an impossible promise about community life. Paul does not say, “get along all the time so that I may find encouragement in Christ.” He says exactly the inverse. By the time he is writing to the Philippians, Paul is an experienced evangelist and minister of the Gospel, and he knows his people well, knows their expertise in petty and useless infighting.

¹ This is Grace Church in Millbrook, N.Y. I won’t name names.

² Galatians 2:11-14

³ Romans 3:23

“Have this mind among yourselves,” he writes, “which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.”

The second person of the Trinity, the Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, “humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.” He was the *form of God*, and took *the form of a servant*, by submitting himself to the same futility and death that affects every human, that affects every one of us, every person who has ever had a silly and pointless fight over nothing.

That is why Paul emphasizes not only Jesus’ death, but specifically his death *on a cross*. The cross has become so ubiquitous, so commonplace, that it’s easy to forget that in the ancient world, it was a symbol of humiliation and shame. Roman citizens were not crucified; it was a death reserved for the dregs of humanity. What Paul is doing here in his letter is contrasting Jesus’ exalted nature – his status as God himself, by whom all things were made – with the self-emptying act of humbling himself to take on the full measure of our humanity. The eternal Son did not take advantage of his status, did not do what the passersby mocked him for not doing, did not come down from the cross. Apart from the Christian faith, the magnitude of such a sacrifice is incomprehensible, but it is the very definition of the God whose nature is love.

But that’s not the end of the story, because therefore, Paul says, “God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

The name to which Paul refers is not the name *Jesus*, given him by his mother, Mary. “Jesus” or “Yeshua” was just a form of the name “Joshua,” a common name in his day and in ours of course as well. Nor was the name to which Paul refers *Christ*, which is not a name but a designation, meaning the “Messiah,” the “anointed one.” That’s why you hear Paul refer to our Lord interchangeably as Jesus Christ and Christ Jesus. The name to which Paul refers is an echo of the tetragrammaton, the four-letter name of God so sacred that orthodox Jews do not pronounce it and most Bibles render it merely as “LORD.”⁴ God the Father has given Jesus *his own proper name*, reflecting the unity of the Father with the Son, which is why at the Name of Jesus every knee should bow... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is LORD.

The reality of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ does not depend on us. It does not depend whether we fight all the time, and that’s a good thing, because as we have seen time

⁴ Michael B. Thompson, “Arianism: Is Jesus Christ divine and eternal or was he created?” in *Heresies and How to Avoid Them: Why it matters what Christians believe*, ed. Ben Quash and Michael Ward (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2007), 21.

and time again, we do. Paul does not tell the Philippians, nor does he tell us, to have a mind “like” Jesus’ mind, or “similar” to Jesus’ mind. We are told to have the “same” mind that was in Christ Jesus.

Humanly speaking, of course, this is impossible. But as the archangel told the Virgin Mary, “with God nothing shall be impossible.”⁵ At our Baptism, we were baptized into Jesus’ death *and* his resurrection, and “marked as Christ’s own forever.” We were not just initiated into the community; we were initiated *into Christ himself*. That is how we can know that Jesus is not a myth. That is how we can move toward having the “same” mind that is in Christ, because God is *already* at work in us through his Holy Spirit, pouring his love into us.⁶ We receive it in our hearts when we hear his Word; we receive it into our hands when we make our Holy Communion.

At the forum this morning, the Reverend Frank Wade reminded us that, from a Christian perspective, the future is more important than the past. Our whole lives are to be oriented toward that future, where we no longer fight all the time, and when all things are reconciled by the God who makes all things possible. That future looks just the way St Paul said it would, right here and right now. Therefore, my brothers and sisters:

“Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others... for God is [already] at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

AMEN.

⁵ Luke 1:37; cf. Luke 18:27, Matthew 19:26

⁶ Romans 5:5