

First, let me assure you, there will be no spoilers in my sermon today! A few months ago, I was discussing all these superhero films with a friend of mine who is a mom, and she made an observation that struck me. She said, "I wish all the good guys weren't fighting this year." She was thinking of the example that set for her young son, but my thoughts jumped immediately to this series. This summer, we're going to explore movies that have been box-office smashes, films that hold a special place in our culture, films that resonate powerfully with us. We're going to ask what these films are saying, why the message resonates so strongly with us, and we'll respond to the message of the film as a people of faith. Sometimes that means we'll agree, other times we'll respectfully disagree.

[**Movie images**] When my friend said, "I wish all the good guys weren't fighting," a lightbulb went off in my mind. Because this year we have two box-office juggernauts - Batman v Superman and Captain America: Civil War. The two films have earned a combined \$1.9 *billion* at the box office so far - clearly we are interested in these movies about the good guys fighting.

Since I don't want to spoil these movies (because I know several of you haven't seen them yet!), we're going to do something a little different here than we will in the rest of the series. Rather than dive deep into these movies, I want to ask, Why are we so fascinated by the good guys fighting? And can we learn anything from that?

Maybe that's not terribly surprising right now. This has been the most contentious election cycle in recent memory (and that's saying something because elections are always contentious!). It seems unimaginable that compromise - the very cornerstone of our democratic process - will ever be seen in Washington again.

But politics isn't the only place we see disagreements turn into fights. Whether at work, with friends or in your home, you've been there. You are convinced in the core of your being you're right. And so are they. Instead of seeking some kind of middle ground, you dig your heels in, and so do they. Soon a tense discussion turns into all-out war (either a full-on fight or possibly a long-simmering cold war). The Church is as bad as anywhere. If you're in church long enough, you see truly outrageous conflicts. Entire denominations have been created because of disagreements in wordings of statements of belief. I know pastors and professors who have lost their jobs because they believe the earth is more than 6,000 years old, or because they disagreed about the exact order of events when Jesus comes back.

[**Illustrate the "taking sides" over issues**] Take just about any divisive issue you can think of - abortion, immigration, same-sex marriage, climate change, and you can find people of faith on both sides. People who have chosen their side because they are informed by their faith convictions. When that happens, people of faith are just like everyone else - we square off, toe our respective party lines, and glare at each other across the gulf. When we come to blows, it's not pretty - real people get crushed in the process of our fights.

So if I may, I'd like to step in the middle and call a time-out. Before more people get hurt.

Friends - and yes, we're all friends, no matter what side of the issue we're on, because the good guys are fighting! So friends, let me assure you: disagreement is inevitable. But war is not. We don't have to fight. We don't have to lob bombs and split and leave a trail of bodies in our wake.

We can find resolution that is peaceable and healthy. And that happens when we commit to love, when we recognize that compromise is necessary even among the people of God, and when we insist on humility rather than on our own way.

This is more difficult than fighting, but if we want to be the people of God, this is our calling.

I know that seems... unlikely. Especially in the Church. In fact, to suggest that the Church ought to compromise is exactly what many of us have been warned against. It's why we cling so tightly to our position - whichever side of the line we're on. [Obnoxious Super-Hero] Especially when it comes to matters of faith, I have the right answer and it's from GOD and Jesus and the BIBLE so to argue with me is to argue with TRUTH! I am RIGHTEOUS DEFENDER MAN, called by God to defend truth and justice! Cower before me, my enemies. God's enemies!

The problem with this attitude is played out marvelously in our superhero movies this year: what happens when two sides who are both convinced they're right and are unwilling to compromise butt heads? Destruction and devastation.

Friends, it doesn't have to be this way. In fact, for people of faith it should *not* be this way. God calls us to be a people of compromise, a people of humility, and above all, a people of *love*. We are called to be a people who shows the world even in how we disagree that we are a people of the Cross, a people of love. That's how it's been since the Church's very first big disagreement.

[Scripture Slide] If you have a bible, turn with me to Acts 15. Acts is the story of the early Church. The book picks up immediately after Jesus was raised from the dead, and it chronicles how the Holy Spirit empowered Jesus' first followers to spread the good news of Jesus' resurrection all over the known world. In the first few years, those followers hit a major speedbump: as they spread out of Israel to the rest of the world, thousands of people who were not Jewish began coming to faith in Jesus. This caused a problem because since God made the first covenant with Abraham, the Jewish faith was restricted to people who were biological descendants of Abraham. It was an ethnic faith. Their Bible (what Christians today call the Old Testament) was *very* clear that Gentiles could not be full participants in God's people. A faithful Jewish person wasn't supposed to eat with Gentiles or even go to their homes. Even the more moderate Jewish people of Jesus' day, the people who thought Gentiles might be welcomed in, said the only way to do so was for the Gentiles to keep Torah, the Jewish law. Gentiles had to be circumcised, observe the Sabbath, eat kosher, and so on.

But word has reached Jerusalem that a couple of missionaries named Paul and Barnabas are ignoring what the Bible says. They're eating with Gentiles. Staying in their homes. Starting churches among them. And they're not requiring them to become Jewish to believe in Jesus. Quite the opposite. They're insisting Gentiles are welcomed into God's people *as is*. No circumcision. No food laws. Many even began worshiping on Sunday - the day Jesus was raised from the dead, rather than on Saturday, the Sabbath day! So Paul and Barnabas are summoned to Jerusalem to defend themselves.

[Battle lines. One side says, "The Bible says..." and the other says, "But look what the Spirit is doing!"] Chaos erupted, and battle lines were drawn. On one side were the people who, Bibles in hand, defended the way things had always been. If Gentiles want to share in Jesus' new life, they must become Jewish. Period. Clear as day.

On the other side were the people like Paul, Barnabas and Peter, who had been out among the Gentiles and seen with their own eyes the Spirit moving among them. They pointed to what they had experienced - that regardless of what the Bible says, the Spirit is moving and active among the Gentiles, incorporating them into the body of Christ whether they're circumcised or not, whether they're eating bacon or not, whether they're keeping the Law or not.

Neither side was willing to back down. For both, what was at stake was the new life Jesus is inviting us all into. Both were convinced they had God on their side.

And look: we're all Gentiles who love Jesus, eat bacon and worship on Sundays so we know how this particular controversy turned out. But put yourself in the place of those Jewish Christians in this controversy. Imagine it's as emotionally charged and divisive as any of the issues that divide us today.

Let's read how this controversy plays out, how the Church waged our first Civil War, beginning in verse 4:

When they arrived in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Paul were welcomed by the whole church, including the apostles and elders. They reported everything God had done through them. But then some of the believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and insisted, "The Gentile converts must be circumcised and required to follow the law of Moses."

So the apostles and elders met together to resolve this issue. At the meeting, after a long discussion, Peter stood and addressed them as follows:

Think about how heated this issue was for them. We know what "long discussion" is code for, right? We've all had "long discussions". Anyway... what does Peter have to say?

“Brothers, you all know that God chose me from among you some time ago to preach to the Gentiles so that they could hear the Good News and believe. God knows people’s hearts, and he confirmed that he accepts Gentiles by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he cleansed their hearts through faith. So why are you now challenging God by burdening the Gentile believers with a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors were able to bear? We believe that we are all saved the same way, by the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus.”

Everyone listened quietly as Barnabas and Paul told about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles.

They share their experiences. "This is what we've seen God doing."

When they had finished, James stood and said, “Brothers, listen to me. Peter has told you about the time God first visited the Gentiles to take from them a people for himself. And this conversion of Gentiles is exactly what the prophets predicted. As it is written:

‘Afterward I will return and restore the fallen house of David. I will rebuild its ruins and restore it, so that the rest of humanity might seek the Lord, including the Gentiles—all those I have called to be mine. The Lord has spoken— he who made these things known so long ago.’

And they turn to the Scriptures. They say, "You know, if you look at it from *this* perspective, this is exactly what God promised would happen one day. And now it's happening."

“And so my judgment is that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead, we should write and tell them to abstain from eating food offered to idols, from sexual immorality, from eating the meat of strangled animals, and from consuming blood. For these laws of Moses have been preached in Jewish synagogues in every city on every Sabbath for many generations.” -- Acts 15:4-21

Finally, James (who is Jesus' half-brother, and apparently one of the first leaders of the Church) stands up and says, "Here's how it's going to be." Did you catch that process? They met together, they spent a *long* time hashing it out, and then they made a decision.

It might surprise you that they didn't just pull out a Bible verse and call it a day. A lot of us probably imagine that's how Church works - whatever the Bible says, that's what we do. There's even a saying that's been around since the Protestant Reformation - *sola Scriptura* (which is Latin for "only the Bible"). But that phrase doesn't mean the Bible is the only book Christians are allowed to read. It actually means that the Bible has everything people need to know how that God loves us and wants to rescue and have a relationship with us.

But it *also* doesn't mean that the Bible is our only source of authority. That's obviously true even in the story above. Both sides were quoting Scripture. One side saying, "They have to be circumcised and follow the Law of Moses!" and the other side saying, "God said the Gentiles were going to be included one day."

[**Illustrate**] Take any issue today and it's the same problem. There are faithful Christians on all sides of an issue, and every one of them has verses to support their point. The problem isn't the Bible's, but ours. We're finite, limited as humans. We don't have a God's-eye view of any situation.

[**Illustrate**] That's why John Wesley - the spiritual grandfather of our denomination - used four sources of authority. Today we call it "Wesley's Quadrilateral". The Bible forms the foundation - it's our sacred book, the witness to the incarnate Word of God. We also rely on Experience, just like the first Christians did. We say, "Well here's how we're experiencing God at work right now. Another pillar is Church Tradition - how have Christians throughout the centuries approached these issues? And finally, we use reason - God gave us brains and God expects us to use them. So we incorporate philosophy and scientific advance as well.

[**Community and Spirit surrounding Quadrilateral**] We use all four of these sources of authority when we make decisions. And surrounding this quadrilateral are two important guides: first is our community. The people around us. Notice that Paul and Barnabas and Peter didn't make these decisions on their own. They weren't lone ranger Christians. This decision was reached in the context of the larger church community.

But above all (and behind and beneath and among), is the Holy Spirit, working among the Church. When the church leaders write a letter to the Gentile Christians to inform them of their decision, here's what they say:

For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay no greater burden on you than these few requirements: You must abstain from eating food offered to idols, from consuming blood or the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. If you do this, you will do well. -- Acts 15:28-29

It seemed right to the Holy Spirit and to us. The Spirit surrounds, indwells and empowers the Church. We can trust the Spirit to lead us as we have these hard conversations - as long as we have them *together*.

And friends, we face difficult conversations. Questions of Sexuality, the meaning of marriage, LGBT identity and rights. Issues like Abortion and Gun control and Refugees. And that doesn't include the difficulties we face in our personal lives, struggles in marriages or parenting or in determining our callings and how those interact with our jobs.

[Love First] We have strong beliefs, convictions that run deep. And we often find ourselves on opposite sides of these issues from others even here at Catalyst. So before we start a super-war, let's look at that first Church. The issues they faced were no less divisive, no less important. But the Spirit led them into truth (a truth, by the way, that is the reason each one of us is sitting here today!) because they were committed to putting LOVE first. Love for each other, love for God. Trust in the Spirit.

Several years after this meeting, Paul is writing to a Gentile Church in the city of Corinth, a church deeply divided, on the brink of its own Civil War. And just like in Jerusalem, Paul holds up LOVE as the idea to which they all should strive, together. Here's what Paul says about love (it'll probably sound familiar).

Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance...

Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely. Three things will last forever—faith, hope, and love—and the greatest of these is love. -- 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, 12-13

[Love First] None of us has perfect perspective. We're *all* on the wrong side of the line sometimes, and we have no way to know while we're on this side of eternity. So friends, let's commit to humility. To admit that we do not in fact have the monopoly on truth, justice and the way of righteousness.

If we cannot put love first, we're doomed to wage wars of religion and we know the fallout. We know the broken lives, the rates of suicide among marginalized groups, the sweeping sense of despair that pervades even our superhero movies.

Catalyst, let's be a Church that insists on putting Love first always and forever. Let's insist that we will never give up, never lose faith. Let's always be hopeful and endure through every circumstance. Let's come together, not to ignore these difficult issues that face our world but to trust the Spirit to lead us into truth.

Communion SetUp

[Communion Slide] Jesus' work to reconcile the war between God and humans, bringing us together.