

Since I was a kid, I've loved board games. My family used to have a weekly board game night, where my siblings and me got to take turns picking the game we'd play together that evening. I always chose Where In the World is Carmen Santiago, even though I'm not very good at geography (I think I just wanted to sing the theme song). And starting back when I was in college, we entered a sort of board game renaissance, kicked off by games like Carcassonne, Ticket to Ride and Cranium. Today, there's a board game for pretty much anything you can imagine.

I'm glad my wife likes games as much as I do - suggesting a game night is an easy win for us, though we don't do them weekly. But one of the great things about the explosion of board games is the variety. I say that because even though my wife and I both love games, we don't love the same kinds of games. Those of you who know me know I'm a super competitive person. Show me a path to clear victory and I will destroy my enemies.

My wife, on the other hand, hates competitive games. She doesn't want anyone to feel like a loser. Fortunately for her, there're dozens of cooperative games, games where you play as a team, where either everyone wins or everyone loses. We have a plane-crash survival game, a time travel game, a haunted house game and on and on. All cooperative.

And here's a dirty secret I've learned: cooperative games are a lot of fun. There's something different about a well-designed cooperative game, where we all have different skills, the same goal and have to struggle together to overcome.

I mention that because one of the main reasons I love games in general is that they're a great microcosm of social interaction. Want to make some new friends? Play a game together - you don't have to figure out small talk because you're talking about the game. After a game or two, you've got some rapport established. Want to do some team building? Play a game together. You'll learn a lot about each other by how you approach problems in the game.

One of the biggest lessons I've learned is something I want to talk about today: problem solving. When we approach relationships (in real life), there *are always* problems. Conflicts. We can't have authentic, meaningful relationships with anyone without facing the reality of conflict.

Most of us approach those conflicts as something to win (the same way I love those competitive games). You want one thing, I want another, and one of us is going to win, while the other's going to be a loser.

But God didn't create us to compete with each other. Competition in games is all fine and well. But when we're in relationship with each other, we're both part of something bigger than ourselves, whether that's a family, a church, a team, whatever. Which means our conflicts aren't contests to win, something that pits us vs them. Rather, they're puzzles to solve, together. Life is a cooperative game, and we only win when we all win.

Message

We're asking, in the wake of Easter, how God's faithfulness to us changes our relationships. After all, relationships are the heart of faith. Jesus calls us into a relationship with him *and* with each other. The bad news, unfortunately, is that there aren't any shortcuts to healthy relationships. But unfortunately that's not how relationships work. It takes effort on our parts to get good at healthy relationships.

The good news is that God created us to be in relationships. Relating with other people is in our DNA. And by raising Jesus from the dead, God has invited us to rediscover who we were created to be.

We began on Easter Sunday with a commitment to faithfulness. The resurrection proved God is faithful to us. And God's continuing faithfulness to us enables us to be faithful to each other - to be together through thick and thin. Then we looked at a practice that flows from faithfulness - the practice of making space for quality time with the people God calls us to be in relationship with. Next, we explored the commitment to accept each other for who we are, not expecting the other to change, but rather celebrate how our differences make us better together, and followed that with an exploration of healthy boundaries.

Last week, Debbie introduced us to another commitment: to extend to each other the gift of Unconditional Positive Regard. This is a grace we extend whereby we assume the other person in relationship with us is doing the best job they can. Debbie mentioned last week that this UPR is essential if we're going to solve problems in our relationships. So this week that's exactly what I want to talk about: how do we work together to solve problems that inevitably arise in our relationships?

Right away, we need to dispel a common lie we believe about relationships - namely that if a relationship is a good one, we don't have conflict.

Not true. Quite the opposite. Relationships are what happens when two different people form a connection with each other. Any relationship in some way communicates we're both part of the same something larger than ourselves - whether that's the same family, the same church, the same company, the same neighborhood. The difference between strangers or acquaintances and friends is that we share some significant part of ourselves with that friend.

We have this idea that the closer a relationship is, the fewer conflicts it has. But that's not true, not exactly. I've found that the closer my relationships are, the deeper the conflicts are, or at least more pronounced. It's because as we get closer, the layers of pretense we all employ get stripped away. The people who are closest to us know us best. We're our truest selves.

And that true self is *different* from anyone else. Which means if you and I are in a friendship, the closer we get, the more we have to accept each other for who we are, which is not the same as me. The more we have to extend to each other UPR because we'll see how different we really are. And that different creates conflict.

It goes way beyond liking competitive or cooperative games. How do you relax? Do your vacations come with a minute-by-minute agenda, or do you want to lay on a beach for 5 days straight? Do you spend the money you have or save it? Do you have a disciplined schedule or take things as they come? Do you process emotions internally or verbally?

A lot of the conflict in our relationships doesn't happen because one of us is wrong and one of us is right. A lot of our conflict is rooted in the fact that we're created as very different kinds of people. So when we approach conflict in relationship with the desire to win, to get our way, to be right, what we're really doing is colonizing the other person, insisting they quit being fully themselves and start being more like us, see things the way we do, act the way we think is right.

That's not UPR. And it's not, as we saw last week, what Paul encouraged the Philippians to do: **"Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves."** -- Philippians 2:3

That's not a command to hate ourselves. It's a command to be gracious towards each other. To quit assuming MY way is always the best way. MY perspective is always the right one.

If we can do that, we'll be poised to solve problems together. To treat our clashing desires not as a contest to win, but as a puzzle to solve, together, as part of the same team.

So what does grace-filled, God-honoring problem solving look like?

First, it looks like figuring out why we're angry or upset. What's at the root of this conflict for me?

James' warning from last week is again helpful here:

Understand this, my dear brothers and sisters: You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry. -- James 1:19

Anger is what psychologists call a secondary emotion. That means it's triggered by something else - usually a worry, hurt or insecurity. So if I find myself angry, I need to stop and ask, Why? What's the source of my anger? Can I flip that anger rock over and find what's under it?

That's important because a lot of different things can cause the same reaction. Say Mary is mad at her husband James because he just bought some new fishing gear. Why is she angry? Maybe it's because money is tight and he didn't discuss the purchase with her first. Or maybe it's because he spends a lot of his weekend fishing with friends and she wants more quality time with him. Both of those underlying issues could produce the same surface anger, and unless Mary takes some time to ask Why, she's not going to be prepared to identify the problem to solve. It'll just move toward a fight.

Once we've figured out what's beneath our anger, we're ready to employ some of the Bible's wisest advice for solving a problem rather than winning a fight:

A gentle answer deflects anger, but harsh words make tempers flare. -- Proverbs 15:1

Gentleness is one of the most misunderstood ideas in the Bible. We hear 'gentle' and think of giving up, rolling over and letting people do whatever they want. But in Scripture, weakness is connected to strength. Specifically, a gentle person is a strong person who chooses not to use their strength to force their way.

This is a potent reminder to remain gentle in our conflicts. When we approach solving a problem together, flaring tempers, name-calling, blaming and personal jabs might make us feel like the winner, but they're toxic for the long-term health of our relationships. When it comes to relationships, if there's a winner, then everyone's a loser.

Gentleness looks like using I statements rather than blaming. It looks like calling a time-out if things are getting too heated. And it looks like remaining committed to solving the problem *together*, not trying to score points to win.

And here's the thing about problem solving rather than competing: it's likely that you end up compromising. Because part of extending UPR to each other, to assuming the other person is better than me, is embracing the reality that my perspective is not the one true right one, that the truth lies *between us*, not within me.

A commitment to solving problems together is a commitment to compromise. One of the most amazing examples of this in the Bible is the first church council in Acts 15 (you're going to go read it on your own this week). The short version is that the early church had a deep, sharp disagreement over whether Gentiles had to become Jews to enter into the faith of Jesus.

Did Gentiles have to keep the Torah or not? Did they have to get circumcised and eat kosher and watch what they wore and all the rest of the Law of Moses? Or could they keep being Gentiles and still follow Jesus?

It was a *big* debate with really strong arguments on both sides. So they all came together as a big council. They prayed together. They discussed and debated. They did all those things we just talked about.

And in the end, neither side 'won'. Neither side got their way, exactly. It was determined that there were a few things the Gentiles had to do - adhere to the Jewish sexual code and not eat meat with blood in it or meat sacrificed to idols. But the rest of it... Gentiles weren't expected to adhere to. They didn't have to get circumcised. They could eat bacon cheeseburgers. They could wear polycotton blends.

It's the sort of decision that, no matter what side you were on, if you came to win, you felt like you lost. The no-law people would be mad there were even a few laws. And the law people were mad so much of the law was thrown out.

But the Jerusalem Council wasn't about winners and losers. It was about the future of the Church, the body of Christ, Jesus' spiritual family. What is the right thing to do to ensure we're all in this together? And that decision required a compromise.

Friends, what sort of conflicts do you face? Are they with a neighbor or a coworker? A spouse or partner or kid or parent? Someone who's part of your spiritual family? Someone you call a friend?

How do you approach those conflicts? Do you set out to win? Do you surrender so as not to rock the boat?

What would happen if you reframed those conflicts not as contests to win, but problems you need to solve together? What would happen to your relationships if you shifted from competitive to cooperative?

1. Assume the other person is trying their best
2. Interrogate your anger
3. Commit to a gentle path forward

Conflict happens because we take real relational risks. We let ourselves be known and we take the risk of knowing others. What God is doing in the midst of that knowing is transforming us. Making us more and more into the image of Jesus - the one who gives up his own life for the lives of his friends.

So don't run from conflict. See it as a sign that you're heading in the right direction. But prepare yourself. Remember you're not trying to win - because in a relationship, when there's a winner, everyone's a loser. Instead, treat conflicts as opportunities, problems to solve together that will make the relationship stronger and stronger. This is God's will for us.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] Jesus could have overpowered us. Instead he gave us a meal.

1. What conflicts have I worked to solve this week?
2. What conflicts have I tried to win or surrender this week?
3. When in the next week might I be tempted to try to win or surrender in a conflict?
4. How can I commit to faithful problem solving this week?

Assignment

Examine how you approach conflict. (Maybe ask some honest friends.) What needs to change?