

The Greatest Debates of Our Age September 10, 2023

I have some bad news for you today. I am about to make you some enemies.

Are you ready? Here are a few questions that I'd like you to answer with a show of hands.

- 1) You've just made yourself a grilled cheese sandwich. You'd like to cut it in half. Do you cut in vertically or diagonally?
- 2) Let's assume that you own (and use) a dishwasher. Do you load the silverware handle-up or business-end-up (tines of fork)?
- 3) When you brush your teeth, do you wet your toothbrush before adding toothpaste? After adding toothpaste? Or do you brush without water, like an animal?
- 4) You (or your parent) made you brownies. Do you eat a center piece that is gooey and fudgy, or do you eat an edge piece that is crisp and chocolatey?
- 5) You are hanging a shirt on a hanger in your closet. When you hang it in the closet, does the front of your shirt face the left or the right?
- 6) You're driving/riding in your car. It's a nice 75 degrees outside and sunny. You are feeling a bit warm. Do you turn on the AC or roll down the windows?
- 7) You are eating corn on the cob for dinner. Do you eat it typewriter-style or roller-style?
- 8) Finally, the classic. You are replacing the toilet paper on the roll. Do you place it so that the flap of paper rests over the roll, or under the roll, or do you just never replace the roll ever in your life, like a certain college roommate of mine?

Thank you for participating in this survey. Now wait until you're in your car to comment to your family members, "Can you believe Cheryl eats her corn typewriter-style?!"

Also, if you think that you are doing these things the right way, just wait until you get married or live with someone who does it the other way. You never knew you even cared which way your shirts face until that moment.

There are lots of sources of conflict in our lives. Some of those conflicts are minor, and some are not so minor. It's one thing to have a debate over brownie preferences; it's another to debate, say, poverty in our country and the most effective methods of addressing it.

What adds to the difficulty and raises the stakes, there is the fact that conflicts are never completely academic. They are never harmless, detached discussions. There is always a personal element. You cut your grilled cheese in triangles because that's how your grandmother did it, and that act is an expression of love. To cut the sandwich into rectangles fails to honor your grandmother and her memory.

Talking about alleviating poverty and helping those in need seems simple, but it involves tax money. You might say, why should my money go elsewhere, when I've worked to earn every penny I have?

Conflict is always personal. There is an issue, and then there is your emotional attachment, the unique perspective that you bring because you are a complex human being with memories and values and opinions.

And guess what? That is good! Conflict is a gift. A healthy, open conflict allows us to gain more insight into ourselves, to think, “I never realized I felt so strongly about work ethic” or our welfare system or windows-down driving.

The danger, of course, with conflict, is that it can turn ugly. Because we have our personal values and our very selves invested in a conflict, there can be pain in arguing. There can be hurt and misunderstanding and feeling unheard and being treated as less than human.

Because of those dangers, sometimes we think of conflict as “bad.” Let’s just keep everything calm, smooth – no arguing, no anger. And in doing so, not only do we deceive ourselves, but we miss out on the gift of self-awareness that conflict can bring.

I take some comfort in the fact that even Jesus talked about conflict. Sometimes we think about Biblical times and the early Church, and we say, “Man, that’s when things were good! That’s when Christians got along and really lived out their faith without any factions or bickering.”

If you need any proof that this was NOT the case, just look at our Gospel reading today. Jesus gives concrete, practical advice for when someone hurts you.

- Talk to the person individually
- then in a small group
- then in a large group
- then if they still don’t listen, treat them as a Gentle or tax collector – someone who is new to the faith and needs a bit more grace and time

The goal in all this, you’ll notice, is NOT to solve the conflict. Jesus doesn’t say, “Talk with that person and figure out who was right and wrong and come up with an action plan.” The goal in this is to restore your relationship with that person. “If your brother/sister listens to you, then you have regained that brother/sister.” The end goal is to be reconciliation so that the person is once again like a member of your family.

Conflict is a gift, as long as you never lose sight of the humanity of the person you disagree with. But our world today does not make that easy.

There’s an old joke of two lawyers, a father and a son. The son, a young attorney, took over his father’s law practice. After a week, the son rushed home and told his father, “Dad! You won’t believe it. I finally settled the old MacGregor lawsuit!”

The retired father yelled back angrily, “Settled it? We’ve been living off that suit for years!”

Sometimes there is a vested interest in keeping a conflict going.

For example, take a look at cable news. Or a news website that gains revenue from every click on an article. Or any and all versions of social media.

There's been research done on the most effective way to get someone to click on an article. Some of the effective methods:

- Make the title interesting and practical – “Seven tips to get your bathtub sparkling!”
- Make the title inspiring – “The most positive news you've read all month”

Those are pretty good. But the most effective way to attract clicks: Make people angry.

Berger, J., & Milkman, K. L. “What Makes Online Content Viral?” *Journal of Marketing Research* 49 no. 2 (2012): 192–205. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmr.10.0353>. See also https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE3j_RHkqJc.

“This teenager was arrested for speaking the truth in school.”

“Politician left charity event early to go to party on his private yacht.”

“Convicted criminal walks free because of legal loophole.”

Thanks to the Internet, there are millions of advertising dollars to be made by creating conflict (whether it is factual or not). And, as is always the case in conflict, we engage with it on two levels – looking at the issue being discussed AND with our own emotions and stories and values.

I will say this, because I believe that this is an issue of faith. You cannot have a healthy debate or conflict on social media.

Conflict is a matter of our faith. Jesus gives us a formula for dealing with conflict in a healthy way. It does not involve a fishbowl into which hundreds of people can look.

On social media (and on advertisement-based news sources), there is not healthy conversation. There is not a careful analysis of the issues or reflection on our own emotional investment. There is simply anger, and it can and does lead to broken relationships.

In that light, we can see that Jesus' words are particularly important. Jesus' words are countercultural. And they are world-changing.

Imagine if everyone worked wholeheartedly towards reconciliation whenever conflict came up. Imagine if every time you read an inflammatory article, you had an engaged conversation with the person who shared it.

Jesus calls us to work to rebuild relationships whenever they are damaged or broken. In addressing that conflict, growth happens.

I will also add that as Episcopalians, this is a pretty central tenet to our tradition. Our tradition was born in conflict, in England during the Reformation that was going on all over Europe. From our founding, we have defined ourselves as the middle road, the *via media*.

The belief is that in every disagreement, in every splitting into factions, there is wisdom on both sides. And so we come together to worship God, knowing that there is conflict, knowing that

there are disagreements here, knowing that we do not all believe the same thing. And we know that we are stronger as a body because of our differences.

Just watch out for the people who cut their grilled cheese diagonally.

Amen.

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