

Leading Through Conflict

My name is Christopher Wesley and I'm the Director of Student Ministry at the parish of Church of the Nativity in Timonium, Maryland in the United States. I just want to start out by saying it's a great honor to be here and I thank you so much for inviting me to be a part of this incredible event.

Many of you have read the book *Rebuilt* and just to give you my history. I've been on staff there for over 12 years as the Director of Student Ministry. My main responsibility is to oversee the faith development of the next generation ages 11 to 29. That means coordinating programs and opportunities that are going to help them grow in their Catholic faith and relationship with Jesus Christ. There have been so many incredible moments throughout my career.

Over my tenure I've seen a lot of growth, and a lot of change. With that growth and change has come some great moments and some very hard seasons. It's during those hard moments where I wonder, "*What am I doing?*"

Sometimes those situations are small and easy to handle like an angry parent or a misbehaving teenager. But, then there are situations that I don't know how to handle because they are new. You don't have to work long in parish ministry to know that conflict will show its face. It's in those situations when we have to have a plan on how to respond.

If you want to know how to face conflict then you need to look at the life of St. Paul. Not only does he have a life worth sharing, but he's someone who faced even the most difficult of situations. And because he was able to face that conflict he's had an incredible impact on our faith and the church.

Here's this guy who has had an amazing conversion. He was an enemy of the church, but Christ came into his life in the most dramatic way. He accepted the invitation to follow Christ, and go and make disciples. His ministry was to go around the world and form churches and share the Gospel.

In his first two missionary journeys he was pushed, pressed, arrested and persecuted. He had the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. While his third journey was similar the level of conflict was brought up a level. So as we dive into his third journey I want to brush upon some of the highlights:

First stop was the city of Ephesus where he already had a reputation. People wanted to be like Paul. They dressed like him, ordered the same drinks from Starbucks as him. But, not everyone liked Paul.

There was a silversmith Demetrius who got furious with Paul. Demetrius' occupation was making miniature statues of the god Artemis. He was like the guy in the airport selling souvenirs. Anyway, he's caught wind of Paul saying, "*gods made*

by hands are not real gods.” Not only does this offend him as a pagan but as a businessman. He feels threatened and he gathers the other miniature statue makers and says:

“27The danger grows, not only that our business will be discredited, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be of no account, and that she whom the whole province of Asia and all the world worship will be stripped of her magnificence.” – Acts 19:27

And so they break out in a riot and create an uproar.

Fortunately for Paul the Roman authorities put a stop to the riot, and he gets out of town. He takes off for Macedonia, then Greece again and then to Troas. There Paul does something incredible. While preaching a young man tragically dies and instead of avoiding it Paul goes to his side and is able to bring him back to life.

So, some amazing and crazy things are happening at the same time. Paul's built up a reputation, people are amazed, coming to Christ but there are a few people who want to stop this. So a plot is developing to take him down.

He's meeting conflict everywhere and that's because the message of Jesus Christ, which he is sharing, forcing people to change. And people back then, just like now don't like to change. And that's because change can be scary and can mean discomfort. But, that's not stopping Paul. He is going to these major cities, converting hundreds of people and the impact and effect are something people cannot ignore.

It's getting to the point where even Paul's followers are growing uncomfortable. And they are starting to suggest to him that it's time to cool things down. They are asking him to be careful because they know one more incident could be the end to what they are all doing. When they reach the city of Miletus Paul gathers the Ephesian church leaders to address them about the current situation.

We read in the 20th Chapter of the book of Acts:

When they came to him, he addressed them, “You know how I lived among you the whole time from the day I first came to the province of Asia. I served the Lord with all humility and with the tears and trials that came to me because of the plots of the Jews, and I did not at all shrink from telling you what was for your benefit, or from teaching you in public or in your homes. Acts 20:18-20

Paul is telling them that despite the pain and the persecution that he stayed true to his mission because he served with humility. His ministry was a calling for God, it was bigger than anything he could have come up with. If God had not called him he would have still been hunting Christians instead of creating them.

Paul also explains that he had confidence and courage. That's why he didn't back down, that's why he did not "*shrink*" from spreading the good news. But Paul continues to tell us that the job isn't done:

But now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem. What will happen to me there I do not know, except that in one city after another the holy Spirit has been warning me that imprisonment and hardships await me. – Acts 20:22-23

Paul is saying that God is calling him into more conflict. He's going to Jerusalem, he doesn't know what's going to happen, except that more imprisonment and hardship awaits him.

Imagine receiving that news? Imagine someone telling you that in the next couple of days you are going to experience hardship, how would you react?

If you work in a church you are going to face conflict. Many of us try to avoid conflict. In fact we run away from it if possible. We seek comfort instead. We try to do something that feels good even if means doing the wrong thing.

When conflict is on the horizon we retract and try to hide. But Paul, he leans into it because:

24 Yet I consider life of no importance to me, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to bear witness to the gospel of God's grace. – Acts 20:24

For him, it's all about what God's calling him to do. It's not that he's saying he wants to die, but what the world is offering is nothing compared to what God is giving him. It's because Paul knows on the other side of the conflict is something greater.

But, he knows that he's not the only one facing conflict. So he tells the disciples:

28 Keep watch over yourselves and over the whole flock of which the holy Spirit has appointed you overseers, in which you tend the church of God that he acquired with his own blood. – Acts 20:28

So, Paul is saying, "*Conflict is coming for you too. It's going to hit you in personal ways and it will hit you in aggressive ways.*" He's not trying to scare us, he's warning us and explaining to us that life is a battle.

In our life there are going to be a lot of highs and a lot of lows. Some we'll expect and other will come out of the blue.

Paul tells us to prepare ourselves for conflict especially when it comes to pursuing a life far from ordinary. The reason we need to lean in is because it helps us address the conflict right away. It leads to a better resolution. When we hide from it, all it

does is grow. You and I we need to lean in and give our whole selves over. Paul tells us:

In every way I have shown you that by hard work of that sort we must help the weak, and keep in mind the words of the Lord Jesus who himself said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'" – Acts 20:35

In other words, surrender yourself to God's plan and just give your whole self over to him. When you give yourself over to Him you'll receive something better.

When he had finished speaking he knelt down and prayed with them all. They were all weeping loudly as they threw their arms around Paul and kissed him, for they were deeply distressed that he had said that they would never see his face again. Then they escorted him to the ship. – Acts 20:36-38

Paul gets on the ship and makes his way to Jerusalem, ready, and leaning in to what awaits.

Granted we might never find ourselves on the same path as Paul, but all of us working, volunteering and serving in the church will face trials and tribulation. The question that you and I need to answer is:

"How will we handle the conflict?"

If you want your parish to grow, if you want it to reach people and if you want to continue sharing the Gospel you will face conflict. Now, I'm not saying that to discourage you, in fact it's meant to prepare you. It's also to let you know that you aren't alone. If you are going to give your life to working and serving the church you need to understand it's important to:

TACKLE THE CONFLICT EARLY

Early on in my ministry I had to fire a volunteer. It's not something that I handled right away. At the time I would say that I never saw it coming, but the truth is I didn't want to deal with it. I was hoping it was resolve it's self. This volunteer was misusing her authority and making decisions that contradicted our strategy.

Again, I ignored it until one of the other volunteers informed me that he was quitting because he could no longer work with someone he felt didn't respect him. He was not the only one who felt that way and tensions in the ministry were high.

I began to lose sleep, I was more irritable and tried hard to ignore it. I finally faced the reality:

Either fire this volunteer or risk losing the respect of my team. When I finally leaned into the situation and asked her to come into my office.

I was nervous; I had never really fired a volunteer before. As I explained the situation to my surprise she graciously stepped down. Unfortunately, I had already lost the one volunteer. If I had stepped in earlier I probably could have saved him and myself a lot of sleep and stress.

Anytime there is conflict it's important to tackle it right away. You might want to hide, avoid it and even ignore it; however, it will not go away, in fact it might get worst.

If conflict is left unresolved it will continue to grow and create a bigger mess because you won't discuss the situation and when there is a void in communication it allows suspicion to grow.

There was one time I received an angry email from a parishioner

SEEK WISE COUNCIL

When conflict enters into our lives we can react in a variety of ways. You might feel angry that someone is against you. You could feel embarrassed because you are afraid something is being exposed. Or, you could feel sadness because you feel like you disappointed someone.

Conflict is filled with emotion and that emotion can sometimes cloud our ability to approach the situation in a healthy manner. That's when we need to go to someone with an outside perspective.

Whether you are the pastor or a lay person on staff you need to make sure you have a small group of people that you can go to for wisdom. Give them permission to give you feedback.

I have a small group of men that I can talk to anytime I face conflict. It's a group of about 5 men. Two of them are fellow youth ministers who work at different churches. I go to them anytime I have a specific situation in ministry. The other three are men that help me with life or work. I go to them any time I have conflict at home, or work.

To prepare for these situations find a group of people you trust. They need to be people who listen to you and you are okay with them giving you feedback. This group of people will know how to give you the encouragement you need to resolve the situations you face.

ACT OUT OF LOVE

The best way to kill conflict is to respond with love. If someone is coming at you with anger or frustration you can diffuse it by listening to them, thanking them for their feedback and smiling.

We have to remember that every single person in our parishes are God's children. We need to show them love and respect. When you show someone love and respect you are affirming them and letting them know that they've been heard. Most times people just want to know that someone is listening.

FIND AN OUTLET

Working in a parish can be exhausting because you are dealing with a variety of persons. Over that time the conflict can wear you down if you do not address it in a healthy manner. One of the best ways to address it is learning how to release it.

Prayer is probably the most important way to release conflict. Not only individual prayer but together with your staff. It's important for us as a church to physically pray together so that we are reminded that we aren't alone.

Then make sure you do something you love. For me that's hiking, running, writing and cooking. It's through those activities that I release the energy and emotion that's built up through conflict.

No matter what you do make sure it's positive and in the end give it all over to God.

As Christ said, ***'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'*** – Acts 20:35

The more you give yourself over to God, the more you will be blessed in return.

Maybe right now life is fine for you, there is no conflict. If that's the case then look for people in parish ministry who are experiencing conflict. We have to remember what Paul told the early church and *"Watch over the flock and tend to the church"*. Help others hand control over to God.

Pray with them, listen to them and invite them to get to know the God who will guide them through.

When we lean in and give over control to God it doesn't mean problems will go away. It means you'll:

Receive the grace that will give you the strength to endure it.

Receive the patience for the plan to be unveiled.

Receive clarity on what it is you need to do.

Receive the peace that someone wiser and greater than you is in control.

It's easy to think Paul just gave up because the conflict got to be too much. Instead he stepped up. He saw that there was a rough road ahead and instead of living in denial, he traveled it.

When we can embrace the road ahead of us, rough or smooth, we cannot be stopped. And that's because the God who has invited us to travel on that journey is with us the entire way. And he's leading us to something great, to something amazing and something better.

Verwendete Bibelstellen auf Deutsch:

Apg 19, 27: So kommt nicht nur unser Geschäft in Verruf, sondern auch dem Heiligtum der großen Göttin Artemis droht Gefahr, nichts mehr zu gelten, ja sie selbst, die von der ganzen Provinz Asien und von der ganzen Welt verehrt wird, wird ihre Hoheit verlieren.

Apg 20,18 – 20: Als sie bei ihm eingetroffen waren, sagte er: Ihr wisst, wie ich vom ersten Tag an, seit ich die Provinz Asien betreten habe, die ganze Zeit in eurer Mitte war und wie ich dem Herrn in aller Demut diente unter Tränen und vielen Prüfungen, die ich durch die Nachstellungen der Juden erlitten habe, wie ich nichts verschwiegen habe von dem, was heilsam ist. Ich habe es euch verkündigt und habe euch gelehrt, öffentlich und in den Häusern.

Apg 20,22-23 Nun ziehe ich, gebunden durch den Geist, nach Jerusalem und ich weiß nicht, was dort mit mir geschehen wird.
Nur das bezeugt mir der Heilige Geist von Stadt zu Stadt, dass Fesseln und Drangsale auf mich warten.

Apg 20,24 Aber ich will mit keinem Wort mein Leben wichtig nehmen, wenn ich nur meinen Lauf vollende und den Dienst erfülle, der mir von Jesus, dem Herrn, übertragen wurde: das Evangelium von der Gnade Gottes zu bezeugen.

Apg 20,28 Gebt Acht auf euch und auf die ganze Herde, in der euch der Heilige Geist zu Bischöfen bestellt hat, damit ihr als Hirten für die Kirche Gottes sorgt, die er sich durch das Blut seines eigenen Sohnes erworben hat.

Apg 20,36-38: Nach diesen Worten kniete er nieder und betete mit ihnen allen. Und alle brachen in lautes Weinen aus, fielen Paulus um den Hals und küssten ihn; am meisten schmerzte sie sein Wort, sie würden ihn nicht mehr von Angesicht sehen. Dann begleiteten sie ihn zum Schiff.