

## STEADY AS WE GO

Conflict and controversy are easily heard and found today. In our reading from Mark, Jesus and the first disciples are enroute to the other side; with talk of the other side being quite evocative. Talk of the other side can stand in for all sorts of different travel in the life of the Church and its members. When we're trying to get from Point A to Point B, no matter the issue involved, we're trying to get to the other side. Close to two thousand years after our gospel reading was first written, it's not hard to put ourselves in the boat with Jesus and the first disciples. If we're trying to get from Point A to Point B, and we certainly are on any number of fronts, we're in the boat with them on the way to the other side. But as we travel in the boat to the other side, Mark warns there shall be conflict and controversy. There shall be storms to navigate and endure. There shall be doubts and fears about the degree to which Jesus is with us and for us. There shall be differences of opinion about what this or that means. And this is just our reading from Mark. There's more conflict and controversy to be heard and to be found in our readings from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians and 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel.

In our reading from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, St. Paul and the Christians at Corinth find themselves embroiled in conflict and controversy again. Whether it's 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians or 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, this is the norm. In both letters, there's normally lots of conflict and controversy. In the first letter, the congregation keeps on welcoming the wrong people and the wrong practices and keeps on excluding the right people and the right practices. This continues in the second letter when the congregation for a time picks a false gospel and its proponents over St. Paul and his pure teaching and preaching. That controversy and conflict are afoot in Corinth is made plain enough by St. Paul's language. At point in our reading from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians, he writes, "There is no restriction in our affection. Only in yours." Ouch! As we travel in the boat to the other side, there shall be heartbreak. And as David and Goliath battle in our reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel, we're told that the storms and the heartache shall sometimes be joined by battles with the odds seemingly stacked against us. As I said earlier, there's conflict and controversy all over the place today. Evidently, as we try to get from Point A to Point B, as we try to make it all the way on over to the other side, we should expect our fair share our turmoil and turbulence; our fair share of conflict and controversy. Would you agree?

I know I would. Challenge and controversy sooner or later visit every avenue and arena of our lives. It happens to us personally. It happens to us professionally. It happens to us at church and in our other pursuits outside of the home and the workplace. And even if we're so remarkably and miraculously blessed that this never happens to us, we don't have to look very far or wide to see conflict and controversy show up in the lives of others. Just as they are in our biblical readings, the bottom line is that conflict and controversy are all around us in our day-to-day lives.

I think back to my days at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Gettysburg. Towards the end of their second year, students and potential internship supervisors and congregations are given the opportunity to meet each other during a two-day matching process. Once all the desired and/or requested interactions have taken place, everyone involved can identify both matches and mismatches; with everybody supposed to identify at least three matches to which they are open. The year I was involved a congregation and pastor out in New Mexico were my first choice and I was their first choice as well. The only problem was another student broke the rules. They said the only pastor and congregation where they could do their internship were out in New Mexico and those responsible for doing the final matching gave in to this rule-breaking demand. Having

played by the rules myself, I was to spend the year somewhere other than New Mexico, while the rulebreaker went out West. So much for fairness! So much for integrity! So much for impartial treatment! I was furious. The righteous indignation meter with which I've previously admitted I struggle very quickly swung all the way over to the right and showed no intention of moving back to the left until my then fiancée Julia told me to get over it. Recognizing her superior wisdom for what would not be the last time, I listened.

In my view, Julia was revealing something important about conflict and controversy. I think she would have us know that not every conflict and controversy is worth our time and energy. I think Julia would have us know that we've got to pick and choose our spots when it comes to engaging turmoil and turbulence. A couple of our readings from Scripture would have us know the same. Start with Jesus and our reading from Mark. Initially, Jesus sleeps through the storm that rattles the first disciples to no end. Later, after stilling the storm, Jesus suggests there was no need for the disciples to get so rattled in the first place; drawing attention to their lack of faith. There's surely a lesson in this this. Not every conflict and controversy is worth our time and energy. Along with Julia, our reading from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians would agree. At one point, St. Paul writes, "We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way." St. Paul and his partners haven't let conflict and controversy take their eye off the ball. They've steered clear of conflicts and controversies, detours and rabbit holes, which can stand in the way of big picture wins. It's sound counsel. Steer clear of conflict and controversy when they bring no prospect for big picture wins. But for the Christian what are big picture wins?

Our reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel suggests big picture wins come in two forms for Christians like you and me. Start with David's habit and history of doing battle with the lions and bears that raid his father Jesse's flock. As David does battle with these lions and bears, he's maximizing the fur and the food available to his community so no one might have to go without life's essentials. He's also protecting the assets of a neighbor so there might be equity and balance throughout the community. This is surely one instance when we Christians are going to want to engage conflict and controversy. It's time to do battle when the health and strength of our communities is endangered or undervalued. The other occasion when it's time for us to do battle is when engaging conflict and controversy bears the potential to grow faith in Jesus Christ and the other members of the Holy Trinity. This is what David does. He goes to war with Goliath so that the earth may know there is a God in Israel. But as David says just after he reveals this faith-creating purpose, there's a way for us to do battle and a way for us not to do battle.

The way not to do it is with swords and spears. The way not to do it is to borrow from the playbook of the world. This is what Jesus had in mind when he once said we're to be in the world, but not of the world. When we engage conflict and controversy for the sake of either more faith on earth or stronger and healthier communities on earth, we follow God's playbook. We fight with what's called the weapons of righteousness in our reading from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians. And what are these weapons of righteousness? They're faith. They're hope. They're love. These are all weapons which either honor relationships or encourage relationships. To have faith is to trust in a relationship. To have hope is to remain open to a new and better chapter in a relationship. To have love is to be ready to lay down our life for the sake of a relationship. In sum, faith, hope, and love, the weapons of righteousness, are relational weapons. They recognize true strength is found not in personal size and stature, not in armor and armaments, not in swords and spears, but in the strength of our relationships with God and one another. It's how the Goliaths which stand in the way of more faith or stronger and healthier communities are felled as we travel in the boat

to the other side. Goliaths fall when on the basis of our relationships God makes use of the sling  
shots and the stones we've together brought to the fight. Amen!