

# GATHER ACROSS DIFFERENCES

EXODUS 20:1-17;  
1 CORINTHIANS 1:10-17

Being in relationship with people who think differently can be difficult. Some minor disagreements aren't a big deal. Maybe you and your spouse or a friend like different sports teams. Good-natured trash talking during the big game can be fun. But serious disagreement about finances or how to discipline children are not fun. You can probably recall a disagreement where some hurtful things ended up being said or done. It could have been about something as close as how to spend money in your family or as far reaching as a presidential election or a military action.

We usually see the word *conflict* in a negative light. Whether it is physical, emotional, or ideological, conflict handled poorly can leave long-lasting wounds and make relationships difficult, if not impossible, to repair. This is not what God wants for us.

Conflict can be harnessed in positive ways, however. A close relative and I usually vote for opposing candidates for public office. We don't shy away from talking about the issues we differ on, but we have covenanted to assume the best of each other as we do. Over the years, we have discovered that we share many of the same goals for our world, but we have different ideas about how to get there. Talking through our disagreements in this way ultimately makes us better advocates for our way of seeing things and more compassionate listeners to others.

One of the oldest guides to living in Christian community is The Rule of St. Benedict. It was written in the sixth century and outlines how especially dedicated communities called *monasteries* would live together. When big decisions came before the community, the leader, known as the *abbot*, is to call the whole community together and ask everyone's advice. Benedict says,

**The community members, for their part, are to express their opinions with all humility, and do not presume to defend their own views obstinately.<sup>1</sup>**

1. Joan Chittister, ed., *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century* (New York: Crossroad, 2010), 52.

# INTRODUCING THE PRACTICE



Has there been a time when you and someone you disagreed with expressed yourselves with humility and love?

What happened?

Have you ever defended your own views *obstinately*?

What happened?

Were you able to reconcile later on?

Spend a few minutes meditating on the first two verses of the hymn “In Christ There Is No East or West.”

In Christ there is no east or west,  
in him no south or north,  
but one great fellowship of love  
throughout the whole wide earth.

In Christ shall true hearts everywhere  
their high communion find;  
his service is the golden cord  
close binding humankind.<sup>2</sup>

What do the lyrics of this song tell you about what unites us across our differences?

2. John Oxenham, “In Christ There Is No East or West,” in *Glory to God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013), #317.

# FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE



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The book of Exodus describes how ancient Israel received the Ten Commandments from God. The famous film of the same name, directed by Cecil B. DeMille, depicts the Israelites worshipping a golden calf while their leader, Moses, is on Mount Sinai receiving ten commandments from God. Moses (played by Charlton Heston) was furious when he returned and found the people worshipping an idol. While Heston's barrel-chested, alpha-white male character does not really match the Bible's description of Moses, the stark contrast between how the people tried to form a common identity on their own and how God wanted them to do it is on full display in both the biblical text and the film.

This giving of the Law came not long after God brought the escaped Hebrews out of Egypt and swallowed the Egyptian army in the sea, making any return to Egypt impossible. Here they were, in the wilderness, stuck with one another. While enslaved in Egypt, the Hebrew people were forcibly gathered together because they provided free labor to build Pharaoh's wealth. While many may have claimed Abraham as a common ancestor, it appears they came from many different contexts. They were likely not the only ethnic group in servitude. After living their entire lives together as slaves, they were suddenly free from oppression. What would keep them together in the future? What would they do without an imposed structure, however cruel it was? Apparently, they tried to create one.

The narrative that covers the next few books of the Bible shows us how they struggled. In fact, it took a whole new generation living and organizing in the wilderness to be ready to enter a new land as one people with one purpose. God gave them the laws so they could have a common reference point for who they are as a people. This way of life that God began to spell out for them superseded any identity they had before.

➤ How does a common purpose or an agreed-upon set of rules help us work through our differences?

➤ What are some common rules you live by?

The New Testament letter of 1 Corinthians shows how these struggles happen generation after generation. If the Hebrews in Exodus were a loosely affiliated group of people, the church at Corinth was really diverse! Corinth was a very cosmopolitan, wealthy city in what is now Greece. It played a major part in trade throughout the Roman Empire. Paul planted this church, and it appears to have included people from many different parts of society. Church gatherings would often include a big, communal meal. The problem was that wealthier folks had a lot more time on their hands. They often arrived earlier than the laborers, who then found that most of the food was gone! They also squabbled about who had been there longer, as if that gave them higher standing before God. In the passage below, Paul reminds them that they are there because they follow Jesus. Anything less is missing the point.

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

—1 Corinthians 1:10–17

Think of a relatively small quarrel in your worshipping community, family, or other group that got out of hand and became a huge thing. It could be the color of the sanctuary carpet or who snapped up that last deviled egg at the picnic. Wonder why we human beings do this.



- ➔ Are there times when pursuing a conflict over a difference is worth it? What are some examples?
- ➔ What gathers or unites your worshipping community?
- ➔ What are some differences that exist?

# FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

Differences should not, and do not, disappear when we come together as Christians. What unites us is faith in God who created many of those differences in the first place. Maintaining this focus is a difficult challenge at times, but it is our guiding star. There are many examples in the Bible and in the life of the Christian church where we see people gathered across differences, living in community, and furthering God's realm of love and peace.



- After the time in the wilderness, the people eventually settled as twelve tribes, united by a common faith in God and God's vision of how to live together. This society was guided by laws protecting the most vulnerable members.
- Jesus and those who continued his movement continued this faith in God and expanded the community that lived by the love of God and neighbor.
- Throughout history, Christians have gathered and done great things together. The World Council of Churches is one such effort. Established after World War II in 1948, diverse Christians around the world network to do mission together and promote peace.
- Many diverse worshiping communities and churches in the United States today, united in faith, gather to worship and witness to God's love in their communities.

Two things many communities do in order to honor differences and focus on what unites them are developing a mission statement and creating a covenant.

## MISSION STATEMENTS

Articulating who we are is extremely important because it helps focus our communal energies and efforts. A mission statement is simply a few sentences stating an organization's core values and what they do to live out those values.

The mission statement of The United Methodist Church is "to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world."<sup>3</sup> Some people would argue that the Ten Commandments were ancient Israel's mission statement. Some churches quote Matthew 25:40 ("Whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me") or Matthew 28:19 ("Go therefore and make disciples of all nations").

If your faith community has a mission statement, write it here:

If it does not mention diversity, how would you incorporate that in the statement?

3. *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2016), par. 120.





The covenant God made with the ancient Israelites was so essential, they built an ark to hold the tablets of the Ten Commandments that represented it. They carried it with them as they established the new land.

## COVENANT

God made a covenant with Israel at Sinai. “I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians” (Exodus 6:7)

When people decide to get married, they enter into a covenant with each other. Many wedding liturgies contain the words “I take you as my husband/wife/spouse/partner” or other language that defines the core of the relationship. The vows that follow that central statement flesh out what the covenant partners mean. On our tenth anniversary, my wife and I renewed the vows we took on our wedding day. Afterward, we remarked to one another that we understood “for better or worse, for richer or poorer” much better than the first time we said them. Perhaps it’s a good thing that we make covenants first, then live into what they really mean!

Making covenants has long been a practice of smaller groups within larger worshipping communities. Members often covenant to pray for one another by name on a regular basis. They may covenant to all engage in a particular spiritual practice such as silence, meditative Scripture reading, or fasting, and to keep one another accountable to the practice when they meet together.

➤ What sorts of covenants exist in your faith community?

# PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

We navigate differences and figure how to get along with people every day of our lives, so this isn't new territory. This section offers a chance to reflect on and enhance our practice of living in community. We will consider our practice through four aspects:

## INDIVIDUALLY

- Who is someone with whom you have strong differences?
- How might you both benefit from coming to mutual understanding?
- What do you have in common that unites you?
- How might you take the first step?



## CORPORATELY

- Where is there tension or conflict in your faith community?
- What might you and others do to be part of the solution?



## IN WORSHIP

Look at a recent worship bulletin or remember a worship service in your church.

➤ How are differences celebrated?

➤ Where do you see what unites all?



## LOCALLY AND GLOBALLY

Name some worshipping communities in your area that are different from yours.

➤ Do you ever gather together?

➤ What other communities gather who are different?

Try to find ways to experience that type of gathering and reflect on what you have in common.



# FOLLOWING JESUS

In this session, we saw how God desires us to live in community with one another, overcoming, not overlooking, differences through shared faith in God. In Jesus Christ, God has repaired our broken relationships with God, so when we gather together across difference, we are passing on the love that God has given to us. We considered areas in our own lives, in our communities, and in our world where we may put this into action.

Close by reflecting on the final two verses of “In Christ There Is No East or West.”

Join hands, disciples of the faith,  
whate'er your race may be.  
All children of the living God  
are surely kin to me.

In Christ now meet both east and west;  
in him meet south and north.  
All Christly souls are one in him  
throughout the whole wide earth.<sup>4</sup>



## CLOSING PRAYER

Loving God, it is often difficult to live in community with people very different from me. I imagine the same is true for them. You created us all and desire that we work together for your sake. Give me courage and love and forgive my shortcomings as I attempt to gather with others in your name. Amen.

4. John Oxenham, “In Christ There Is No East or West,” in *Glory to God* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013), #317.