

SERMON Pastor Cris

I rarely lack confidence in my own opinion. That's a round-about way of saying, "I'm pretty sure I'm always right." Or at least I **think** I'm always right. I know that's not a very flattering thing to say, and I will admit to it being an ongoing topic of self-improvement...especially over 30 years of marriage. My very patient and helpful wife has taught me that no matter how "right" I think I am, my response to anything – but especially something she says – never, and I mean **never**, starts with the word "no."

I've learned that lesson. Mostly.

I had an experience about twelve years ago that was a real growth opportunity for me on this issue. I was deployed to Djibouti, Africa and had been serving with two other Chaplain Lieutenants. In other words, we were all the same rank. I had functional authority as I had been named the Deputy Command Chaplain and Senior Protestant Chaplain. The command chaplain was a Catholic priest from a little town called Claymont, Delaware.

Justin, Joshua, and I, three junior lieutenants, were all on our first deployment. Joshua had been there before I got there and ended staying longer than expected. He was still there when I left after 11 months. We all came from different backgrounds and approached ministry very differently. Justin was Southern Baptist. Joshua was Four Square Gospel but had been raised in the Pentecostal church in Nigeria, where he was from.

About halfway through my time – actually it was right about this time of the year because the issue was planning for Pentecost – Joshua and I got into a bit of an argument. Actually, we got into a heated disagreement that the whole chapel office got to listen to. The walls and doors were thin.

I don't remember the finer details of the argument, but I know it was about a Pentecost Revival service that Joshua wanted us to host – and he wanted all the Protestant chaplains on the base to participate. I was trying to explain to him that what he was describing wasn't part of my faith tradition and so I didn't want to participate, nor could we **require** the Protestant chaplains to be involved.

He didn't like my resistance or my answer – especially as I was answering in my role of Senior Protestant Chaplain and Deputy Command Chaplain. As I said, it got heated. We went round and around about the how and why of this worship opportunity. And this wasn't the first time we had disagreed over matters of ministry or worship.

I know how the argument ended...I had functional authority which means, in the end, my opinion was "right" and there was a Revival service that **some** of the Protestant

chaplains joined. But I also know that something changed in me. Coming out of this disagreement I had the realization that I was definitely right in my opinion. That wasn't surprising. But I eventually realized that Joshua was also right.

It might not sound earth-shattering, but for me, it was. I was so sure that I was right and he was wrong that everything about my approach to the conflict was grounded in that dualistic reality. Only one of us could be right and I was so sure it was me.

Before I extrapolate that realization into a larger point, I do want to say, for the record, that Joshua and I had some ongoing disagreements throughout our time together in Africa, but I also consider him a friend who I've had the pleasure to cross paths with a few times in my Navy career.

There are certainly times where there is clearly a right and wrong – and there are plenty of times that people in positions of power do their best to make what is wrong seem to be right. When that happens, we can't give up what we know to be true for the sake of a false peace.

But sometimes there just isn't a wrong to another perspective's right. Especially when it comes to how we live a life of faith. Especially when we're trying to respond to stories that have been handed down to us for generations.

Jesus begins what will be a chapter-long prayer for the disciples in our Gospel reading this morning. He continues the theme of deep abiding presence and the truth that living with God means a pervasive relationship. In fact, he defines "eternal life... that they may **know** you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." It's not about something that happens after we die to extend our chronological life, it's about living in that encompassing reality that we have seen God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

He ends this part of the prayer with the hope, the promise, the prayer "protect them in your name that you have given me, so that they may be one, as we are one." So that **we** may be one. As much good as we've tried to do in the world, as much as the whole Christian church has tried to proclaim God's truth to a desperate world, we haven't been too successful at being "one."

"Christian" movements have been founded entirely on the premise of determining who is right and who is wrong, who is in and who is out. Different communities have claimed to hold the whole truth and that makes them better than anyone else. From almost the very beginning, we've splintered the church over and over again because of

interpretation of the truth instead of seeking deeper relationships with those with whom we disagree. We've murdered "heretics" for being different. We've colonized and converted at sword point in a perversion of the gospel.

And none of that is what Jesus asked for us... or of us. Jesus prayed that we would find deep connection with God and one another so that we would know the truth of God's love.

Now more than ever, I believe that Joshua was right in trying to draw the Christians of Camp Lemmonier together in worship. I regret that I didn't see it at the time and didn't join his effort.

In today's reality, as people take the message of relationship that Jesus proclaimed and turn it into messages of exclusion and hate, imagine, just imagine, what the world would be if we could find a grace-filled, loving way to live together as Jesus asked us to.

Imagine what the world could be if we sought to build loving relationships as the center of our identity instead of looking for ways to prove our own rightness. Imagine what the people of God could do if we could unite at the foot of the cross and bear witness to a message of sacrificial love instead of claiming worldly power, because we think we're better than everybody else. Imagine what it would be to embody the prayer of Jesus.

Let us pray...Loving God, we come together in places of worship to deepen our connection to one another and to you. As we hear your Word and experience your promise, may we find ways to strengthen our connections to those who differ from us. May we find ways to embrace your grace-filled kingdom that brings an end to violence and conflict. May we all – your whole creation – find truth in your peace. Amen.