

It has been quite a few days in the news—not only about the submarine lost, but the conflict in Russia. Last week I was watching the conflict within the Southern Baptist Convention. You can pretty much pick your conflict of choice every week.

And then the gospel lesson is an extended teaching about conflict. Which leaves Christians who are uncomfortable with a lot of conflict at something of a loss. Even if you can manage conflict in your life relatively okay, it probably isn't an accident that the only part of this lesson that Christians have tended to remember is the part about "sparrows" and "the hairs of our head"—the assurance part--so that we would not be afraid when conflict comes to us. But we had to read the whole lesson and not just the assuring part. And the whole lesson makes the startling point—Jesus makes the point—that *there is something about following Jesus that we should expect will lead us into cause conflict.*

That is different from the kind of conflict that we mostly witness—the conflict that comes from human foibles and flaws, bad decisions and sin. The story of Abraham and Sarah and her Egyptian slave and their two children is that kind of story of conflict—conflict from a bad decision, conflict from rivalry and jealousy. Yet, the peculiar witness of that Bible story is that, even then, God was working on both sides of that fallout. It would be hopeful, wouldn't it, that when we end up in fallouts of our own making that we could trust that God was somehow working on all sides of it? J

*And yet, that kind of conflict is not what Jesus is talking about.* Jesus expects that following in his way of relating to God *will actually lead people into conflict.* And there is plenty of evidence from Jesus' experience, and the apostles', and Christians ever since that that does happen. It doesn't happen all the time. There is enough stability within the Church and the Church's relationship to the governments and societies in which the Church lives, that we are able to worship together, learn together, become friends, and serve together, for long periods of time. And then there are the conflicts of human foibles and sin. And then there are the conflicts that come from actually trying to be Christian.

There are plenty of times when Jesus' teaching on expecting conflict gets messed up in our minds—and Christians can manage to think they are actually *supposed* to be in conflict. There are definitely clergy and congregations that *actively seek to be in conflict.* Every Sunday becomes an opportunity to remember again who your enemies are supposed to be.

And yet, that isn't the point. There has never ever been a liturgical practice in Christian worship...of pausing...and turning to your neighbor in the pews...and saying: "The sword of the Lord be always with you. (And also with you.)" No, never! :) Instead, what is it that Christians have said from the very beginning? "The peace of the Lord be always with you. (And also with you.)"

There is no doubt that there is something profoundly counter cultural about the spiritual path of following Jesus that keeps putting Christians in tension with others, with institutions, and traditions, and certain powers of commerce and politics. *But Jesus' priority was not creating conflict, but seeking the greater peace that was—and is--so often elusive within a conflicted world and within our conflicted hearts.*

The way I've been able to think about this expectation of conflict for Christians is that Jesus mirrors a God who is restless for peace...and who keeps enlisting us in God's restlessness for peace...each of us in different ways.

It is an honor. It also isn't necessary what we expected or even wanted. And yet for some reason I don't understand, this is the way that Jesus' proclamation that the "kingdom of God is near" is ever so slowly being fulfilled. This is the mysterious way of God. And this is the way in which we may help each other keep moving forward.