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“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” ... and ... “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Matthew 22:37,39 (NET)

The sentiment of love has always been centric to the ethos of Biblical faith communities. It is my understanding that social behavior in the Bible is always relational (up close and personal) which is best defined by an ethic and ethos of love. We aspire to live up to these two great claims/commands on the community of believers – “love God”, “love others.” Truth is—if our culture is to know the love of God and authentic love for God and neighbor, then it will be the churches’ mission to show these truths through actions and attitudes. Can I get an “Amen!” This quote from Richard Rohr illustrates the centrality of love to our faith and practice.

If love is the soul of Christian existence, it must be at the heart of every other Christian virtue. Thus, for example, justice without love is legalism; faith without love is ideology; hope without love is self-centeredness; forgiveness without love is self-abasement; fortitude without love is recklessness; generosity without love is extravagance; care without love is mere duty; fidelity without love is servitude. Every virtue is an expression of love. No virtue is really a virtue unless it is permeated, or informed, by love.

Richard Rohr

So, what is happening when church feels more like a battlefield than a caring community? Conflicts are not a new phenomenon, unfortunately, for Christian communities. I recently mused that the Christian Bible would be much shorter if it were not for the extensive content addressing church conflict issues. From the current lection focusing on the epistles of Paul to the latest meetings of church boards, there is a tragic litany of stories about failed unity and waves of discord tearing at the fabric of the church.

Some responses to consider when working in an organizational conflict environment include, but are not limited to the following:

- ◆ Avoid letting fear of confrontation override the need to address conflict among persons and within leadership systems
- ◆ Aspire to move conflict from being person-focused to a focus on substantive issues
- ◆ Create clear and transparent processes and lines of communications
- ◆ Seek the wisdom from third-party interventions
- ◆ Regrettably, when conflict is entrenched, leadership changes are necessary to resolve conflicts that hinder church growth and health
- ◆ Change is necessary, resistance is common, acceptance is a process
- ◆ Focus on congregational identity, vision, mission, and values
- ◆ Permeate every decision and situation with prayer
- ◆ Reversing decline requires a visionary journey of working through institutional conflict, reframing the congregational narrative, and developing a missional passion with an outward facing focus

Churches that are serious about renewal for church growth and health are using processes like town hall meetings and World Café dialogues to identify critical issues, build consensus for innovation in ministry, and to affirm loving relationships.

(“...these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love. 1 Cor 13:13)