
Thank You for Arguing

**A sermon by the Rev. Canon George Maxwell
The Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany – Year C**

I love to argue.

In a prior life, I was once introduced by a friend to someone else who said, "This is George. Now beware, he's in the arguing business." I realized that having a priest who likes to argue, or even a spouse, is not always what people are looking for. But there is, I think, a dignity to it. There is a purpose worth pursuing.

For you see, arguing is really about telling a story in hopes that I can persuade you to agree with it. Arguing is a way that we come together. Arguing is a way that we find the truth.

Arguing is the art of persuasion.

The problem with arguing, I think, is that we often fail to distinguish between arguing and fighting. Now fighting is a little bit different and I'm pretty good at that too at times. But there's a different purpose. Fighting is about winning. Fighting is about vanquishing your foe. Fighting is about domination.

Do you see the difference between arguing and fighting?

Now, I think Jesus knows something about this distinction and helps us understand it in our Gospel passage today, the Sermon on the Plain from Luke.

"Blessed are the poor," he says. "Woe to the rich." Those sound like fighting words, don't they? Right off the bat.

But if you think a little about what those words might have meant to the people that were there, you might get a different perspective. You see, "poor" and "rich" to that crowd are different than we think of those terms.

They believed, in first century Palestine, that fundamentally they lived in a closed system, a closed society: that whatever goods and possessions there were to have, whatever status or power there was to obtain, whatever love there was to receive, was already out there and already with someone.

So, the key was simply to keep what you inherited. The distribution had already been made. The poor, then, are those who lack the power to hold onto their inheritance. They can't protect themselves. They are vulnerable. The rich are the ones who are acquiring goods that they don't deserve, gaining possessions that they should not take, getting power that is not theirs to have.

A widow without a son is poor, regardless of how much money she might have. A landowner with vast estates is poor if he is maimed, or blind, or suffering from leprosy. Poor is about not being able to protect yourself. Rich is about being greedy.

Now of that crowd, there were probably a very small minority of people who fell into either one of those categories. The majority of people there were neither rich by this Biblical definition nor poor. They are not the ends of an economic spectrum. They are two minority groups.

So, why is Jesus pointing this out? What's his purpose?

They're not fighting words. It's an argument. It's trying to point to the community. It's trying to point to a consciousness of the whole. It's trying to invite people to change their behavior about their own self-perception

or about their way they're behaving in the world because of the presence of God, because of the community, because of what it does to other people.

The Gospel is good news for the poor. They are raised up. Jesus' mama taught him that, right? It's right there in the Magnificat.

It is exactly what Jesus reads from that scroll when he goes to his home synagogue. Isaiah says it; Jesus claims it. His purpose is the whole. It's the, "We," not the, "I," we might say. When Jesus is offering woes to the rich, he is not attempting to vanquish them or dominate them or exclude them. He is inviting them to join. To be members of the community. To exercise their power, their presence, in relationship with other people.

It's for the good of the whole. That's his purpose. It's an argument, not a fight.

Now I want to offer you an example that's maybe more contemporary, perhaps even more personal. John Gottman, a marriage therapist and researcher, did a prolonged study back in the '80s and '90s. He had a retreat center in Seattle, Washington, and for nine years he invited couples to come in and spend the weekend.

They would put them in various situations. They would invite them to have various conversations and they would film it all. You could think about reality television, really, because that's kind of what it was like. Except instead of broadcasting it into our living rooms, they analyzed all of the film because they wanted to know, how did people argue? How did they engage in conflict? What made the difference between successful marriages and those who ended in divorce? Their findings, I think, were fascinating.

Turns out successful marriages have just as much argument in them as those that end in divorce. That wasn't the difference. The tone of those conflicts could be just as energized in successful marriages as those that ended in divorce. That wasn't the difference. No difference in the content either really. There was a lot of similarity in the way these couples engaged in conflict.

The difference was that one way or another, the successful marriages used the argument to solve a problem, to better their marriage, to deepen their relationship with each other. And they both knew it even in the heat of the argument. Whereas the marriages that ended in divorce tended to use that moment to win, to dominate, to vanquish. And they both knew it in the moment.

Argument is a way that friends find truth. Fighting is a way that the community fractures. It's its very purpose when you think about it.

Now we are re-engaging here at the Cathedral. People are coming back after years of being away and we've had very different experiences during that time and we haven't had each other to process all of that. And what I'm experiencing is that we have very different interpretations of what's happened over the last two years and why. Very different interpretations of how one leader or another has behaved or led. But we have not had each other to process those experiences.

It's time perhaps for a little arguing. And that would not be unusual. That's why we gathered as a community. We, I hope, know how to argue without fighting. And we do that because we are not conducting our arguments on the terms of the world. Our arguments are not solely conducted on philosophy or political theory or sociology.

They are also conducted on the Baptismal Covenant, on the Eucharist, on the community, on the love of Christ and life in God. Our eyes are always on the prize of the growth of community and the growth of love. That's what it means to be a Christian. That's what it means to come here and be part of this community.

And I hope it gives us the ability to argue without fighting, knowing that it's really about purpose. Our purpose is to talk to friends about finding the truth and in doing so to grow both in our relationship and in community.

One practice that you might consider as you tiptoe into this reality is silence. Silence is what gets lost in a fight, but silence can be found in an argument. Silence is what stops us from going too fast, from getting tied up in that loop, from letting our self-conscious sense of things propel us into this territory we really don't want to enter. Silence is what lets God emerge in us. Silence is what lets our deeper mind guide us. Silence is what reminds us that the person in front of us is also a child of God.

And it's easy to do. You just have to stop talking. Just for a moment, experience the silence. The reminder of God's presence. And you'll find yourself in an argument, but not in a fight.

We had a going away party recently for a dear friend of mine. He's been a member of this parish for a long time. Other than our friendship, we do not agree on a single thing. Not politics, not sports, and I particularly don't like his choice of basketball teams. As we were toasting him on the night of his going away party, he looked up and with some emotion on his face said, "I am so thankful for this community. For you gathered here. You have changed the way I've thought about things over the years, you really have."

And I have to confess my immediate reaction was, "Yeah, we brought you around."

And then I was silent for just a moment.

And I thought, I've really changed too. I have really changed the way I see things by your presence, by your arguments, by your story.

We have both grown together. Hopefully far from the positions we would've occupied had we been left to our own devices. Through argument in friendship.

That's where truth comes from, I think. Truth emerges out of argument among friends and that's good news. Thank God. Amen.