

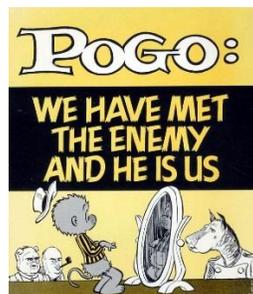
“This Is Us: Who Are We Together?”  
Acts 15:1-18

Intending to raise cattle, a family from New York bought a ranch out West. When their friends visited and inquired about the ranch’s name, the would-be rancher replied: “I wanted to name it the Bar-J. My wife favored Suzy-Q, one of our sons wanted the Flying-W, and the other liked the Lazy-Y. So we’re calling it the Bar-J-Suzy-Q-Flying-W-Lazy-Y.” “But where are all your cattle?” the friends asked. “None survived the branding.”

(First service: Families and communities are messy, especially when there is conflict. It is never easy to be in community. While our families and communities are the things that give us life and help us grow, they are also the places we are most vulnerable. The show “This Is Us” shows the beauty and challenge of being in relationships. Here is a clip from Valentine’s Day fight scene between Jack and Rebecca, the mom and dad in the Pearson family:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-rNrbuPqkg>)

Staying together in our families, churches, and communities is not always easy. Working things out with others can be challenging, especially when we see things differently. Yet, in order to thrive and find happiness in life we need each other. One of my friends in ministry used to say, “Jesus said that whenever two or three are gathered in my name there I am with them. It should also say, whenever two or three are gathered in my name, things get messy.” We all know the joy and challenge of living with others. And today, I would like to invite us to consider the importance of being together with all the challenges that it brings to us. Parker Palmer who lived in an intentional community of Quakers early in his career talks about community this way, “By 1975, I had come up with my definition of community (screen): ‘Community is that place where the person you least want to live with always lives.’ By 1976, I had come up with my corollary to that definition: ‘And when that person moves away, someone else arises immediately to take his or her place.’ The reason is simple: relationships in community are so close and so intense that it is easy for us to project on another person that which we cannot abide in ourselves. As long as I am there, the person I least want to live with will be there as well: in the immortal words of Pogo, ‘We have met the enemy and he is us.’ That knowledge is one of the difficult but redeeming gifts community has to offer.”



Parker says, "We are imperfect and broken beings who live out our lives in an imperfect and broken world. The genius of the human heart lies in its capacity to hold tension in ways that energize and draw us forward instead of tearing us apart."

So knowing this about community, how could we fulfill our God-given purpose as human beings in community? How might we as a congregation fulfill our mission of transforming lives by sharing the love of God in our communities, when sometimes community life is challenging to say the least? The good news is that the Bible is full of examples of the people of God working through their challenges in community. The book of Acts has many stories sharing with us examples of how the early followers of Jesus worked through their challenges. One of the challenges that kept coming up was expanding the boundaries of their community. In any human community, you have to have rules and regulations, but at the same time, you must allow room for continued growth and progress. Let's take a look at how they handled this tension. At Pentecost, in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit pushed the disciples out of their comfort zones to go all the nations of that time. In Acts 8, we hear about the Ethiopian eunuch and the expansion of the church to that part of the world. In Acts 10, we hear about Cornelius, a Roman soldier, receiving the Holy Spirit and being baptized. And in today's story from Acts 15, we hear about a debate among the followers of Jesus about whether to include Gentiles in the faith without requiring them to be circumcised.

(Read Acts 15:1-18 -screen).

The accepted norm of things was to have people who want to follow the way of Jesus become Jewish as part of their preparation. New followers had to accept the norms and traditions of the Jewish faith because the followers of Jesus saw themselves as Jewish. That involved some requirements such as circumcision, special training in the Law of Moses (the Bible at the time), change in diet, and special observances of holy days. These requirements were seen as hindrances to new believers, especially when considering the health risks involved in circumcision. But this was a tough sell for those already in the faith. It felt like betraying the core of their identity and watering down their faith. It seemed that for the sake of reaching out, some of the leaders like Paul were willing to "sell out" their true marks of faith. We can only imagine how difficult it was to navigate such a major change in the life of the early church without a clear precedent and without even having Jesus there to guide the transition. Even though this seemed like the way to go because it was expanding God's love, there was no flashing neon sign in the sky or the benefit of hindsight to guide.

So how did they handle such a conflict? They engaged it openly and with passion. They prayed together and kept the conversation going. They listened deeply to each other and to God. They shared stories of faith. They did not water down their passions. They faced their disagreements through an intentional process of dialogue and discernment. They knew that their ultimate allegiance was to God who often expanded their boundaries on love and called them to stay united in their mission. They compromised and worked together for a common solution.

How do we translate this into our time so that we can not only survive being in community but thrive? Knowing how our culture is so divided right now, I believe that it is important for us to witness to a different way of being in community where we create sacred spaces for disagreement and growth. I have a couple of resources that I would like to share with you today that could help each of us on this path. The first one is called *Red Zone, Blue Zone: Turning Conflict into Opportunity* (screen) by James Osterhaus, Joseph Jurkowski, and Todd Hahn. The key idea is that we often get triggered and hooked emotionally when we get into a conflict with someone and so instead of dealing with the issues in a calm and rational way, we end up escalating the conflict. When we are in the red zone of conflict, we lose our ability to connect with others with openness. We are operating out of fear, anger, or hate. Therefore, we disengage, malign, demonize or resent the others. But when we are able to stay in the blue zone, we can continue to engage, hold tensions together, and be honest and creative. Here is a list of common emotional triggers and the internal pieces that go with them:

<b>Red Zone Issue</b>	<b>Message</b>	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Negative</b>
Survival	I must take care of self	Responsible	Distrustful
Acceptance	I need to be loved	Serving others	Rescuers
Control	The world is a threat	Organization	Rigid and walled off
Competence	I must perform	Achievement	Perfection

Here are some red zone behaviors (screen):

- I disengage
- I become easily annoyed
- I'm resentful
- I procrastinate
- I attack the other personally
- I avoid people, situations (or quit all together!)

Here are some of the blue zone behaviors (screen):

- Thoughtful
- Reflective
- Listen deeply for what the underlying issue might be
- Do not see negative intent in the other person.

Most of us identify with at least one or two of these. The worst part of all of this is that these triggers are often hidden from us. They are unconscious. They are underneath the surface and often end up hurting us because we are not aware of them until we

bring them out to the light and allow God to heal us. What do you think of this idea of Red and Blue Zones in conflict? How does it resonate with your experiences in community?

Another tool that could help us in times of conflict is “Intentional Dialogue” with its three steps of mirroring, validation, and empathy where we learn to listen deeply to each other without having to agree or solve the problem right away. This is also in your bulletin and I hope that you can take it and learn to use it in your life.

The bottom line in any community setting is to be committed to one another by assuming and extending welcome to each other’s ideas, thoughts, feelings, and deep yearnings with love, compassion, and respect.

I would like to share with you a scene from “This Is Us” where Rebecca shows her commitment to the relationship instead of doing the easy thing of walking away. As a Vietnam vet, Jack used drinking as a way to deal with his pain. In this scene, he was in the red zone of conflict, while she was in the blue zone. Rebecca does not give up on Jack, seeing that they needed to work through the challenges they were facing together:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iyFxGa3t5xM>

May we have the same kind of courage to stay in community and to find new and creative ways to live out our God-given purposes and to allow others the space to do the same. I would like to end with words from the Rule of Saint Benedict about commitment to community that could help us today (screen):

“We vow to remain all our life with our local community. We live together, pray together, work together, relax together. We give up the temptation to move from place to place in search of an ideal situation. Ultimately there is no escape from oneself, and the idea that things would be better someplace else is usually an illusion. And when interpersonal conflicts arise, we have a great incentive to work things out and restore peace. This means learning the practices of love: acknowledging one’s own offensive behavior, giving up one’s preferences, forgiving.” Amen.

## STEPS OF INTENTIONAL DIALOGUE

By Harville Hendrix

### STEP ONE: MIRROR

In the Mirroring step, when your partner pauses, or perhaps when you have asked them to pause, you will repeat back everything you heard them say. You may paraphrase, but you will mirror without analyzing, critiquing, modifying or responding.

**How to Mirror:** “If I got it, I think you said...” or “So you’re saying...”

Ask if there’s more: “Is there more?” or “Tell me more.”

### STEP TWO: VALIDATE

Once the Sender says there is “no more”, the Receiver will attempt to validate what the Sender has said by letting the Sender if what they have been saying is making logical sense to the Receiver. If it does not, the Receiver will simply share what does make sense, then ask the Sender to say more about the parts that do not yet make sense.

**How to Validate:** “You make sense to me because...” or

“That makes sense, I can see where...”

**Ask for clarification:** “This part (X) makes sense, but help me understand, can you say more about...?”

### STEP THREE: EMPATHIZE

In the final step, Empathy, the Receiver takes a guess as to what they imagine the Sender might be feeling with regard to what they have been saying. If the Sender has already said how they feel, then the Receiver can simply reflect this back once more. If, however, the Receiver can think of an additional way their partner might be feeling, this is where they can add that.

When sending empathy, it is fine to say something such as: “I can imagine you feel like .... (you’re the only one working on our relationship).” However, it’s important to know that once the word “like” comes into play, what’s being expressed is a thought, not a feeling. The best way we have come to distinguish the difference between a thought and a feeling, is that a feeling can generally be described in one or two words: e.g., happy, excited, safe, cared for, hurt, frustrated, scared. Try to include some “feeling” words if you can, in this step. Doing so, especially when you are lucky enough to hit the proverbial nail on the head, will often bring a look of recognition and joy to your partner’s face faster than anything else you could say.

**How to Empathize:** “I can imagine you might be feeling...”

**Check it Out:** “Is that how you feel?”

### Finish

Now that the Sender has said all they have to say, and the Receiver has mirrored, validated and empathized, the whole process reverses. The Receiver now gets their turn to respond with whatever came up for them while the first partner was sending, and the Sender shifts into being the new Receiver who does the mirroring, etc.