



**“TENSION TAMER”**  
**SCRIPTURE: JEREMIAH 4: 1-10; LUKE 5: 1-12**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**  
**February 3, 2019**  
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**Jeremiah 1:4-10**

1:4 Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,

1:5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

1:6 Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy."

1:7 But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you,

1:8 Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD."

1:9 Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth.

1:10 See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

**Luke 4:21-30**

4:21 Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

4:22 All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, "Is not this Joseph's son?"

4:23 He said to them, "Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, 'Doctor, cure yourself!' And you will say, 'Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.'"

4:24 And he said, "Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown.

4:25 But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land;

4:26 yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.

4:27 There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and

none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian."

4:28 When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.

4:29 They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.

4:30 But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

The Word of the LORD.

**Thanks be to God.**

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There are many ways to deal with conflict in families. We learn some of our strategies from the ways our parents told us to deal with conflict.

One of my mother's tools in her tool kit was guilt. When I would fight with my sisters, my mother (an only child), would say: "If I had had a sister I would have been so thankful and happy to have a sister that I would have never fought with her. You should be so glad you have sisters."

I remember thinking at the time "not if you had her for your sister."

Or there's the strategy John's dad used when John and his brothers wouldn't stop getting into physical fights with each other. He came home one day, called them all up to the playroom, and said, "I have something to help you all with all your fighting." And he pulled out boxing gloves.

John remembers thinking, "I don't think this is a good idea."

So when my children started fighting a lot at the dinner table about one getting more than the other on their plate, and I realized that even measuring it out by counting kernels of corn per plate wasn't working, I searched for the best practices parenting books had to offer.

I knew guilt and beating the pulp out of each other were not the best options. So after a careful read of a wide variety of parenting books, I was ready to affirm my children's feelings, help them understand that family life isn't about everyone being treated the same, but about working to make sure everyone gets what they need.

So, we're at the breakfast table and I serve everyone their pancakes. Mary Elizabeth, probably about 4 at the time, with a head full of curly hair and her pink cowgirl boots on said, "Sidney got more than me."

"Mary Elizabeth," I said, "it sounds like you need some more pancakes. In our family, we want to make sure everyone gets what they need, not that everyone gets exactly the same. If you want more pancakes there are plenty."

She stared at me. I could see the wheels turning in her little brain. This wasn't the response that she had expected.

I began to feel a triumphant sensation welling up inside of me. I had conquered the scarcity mentality in my children. They truly understood the difference between equity and equality. They were equipped to deal with tension and conflict without making it a competition or a zero sum game. All is right with the world.

"But Sidney got more than me," she said. "His pancakes are bigger. He got more."

"Mary Elizabeth, what do you need?" I said, making another attempt to give this moment a happy ending. "I want to make sure you get what you need."

"I need Sidney's plate," she said.

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Engaging in conflict in healthy, growth-inducing ways is profoundly challenging. Not just with a 4 year old who stands her ground, but with us grown ups who've been taught all sorts of unhealthy ways to orient ourselves to tension and conflict.

In fact, people like us—people formed in a faith rooted in love and grace, rooted in peace and unity—have made a virtue out of doing everything we can to avoid conflict.

I think every woman in this sanctuary who was socialized in the American South can testify to the way we were especially taught to make everyone's comfort our top priority. So, even when someone says something that is cruel or does something that is destructive or harasses or bullies, we are taught to be masters at calming the waters.

The nervous laugh when you know something someone said isn't funny, but you don't want to make anyone uncomfortable. (*he he*)

The sweet and subtle pivot to a different topic to divert attention from the offender. "Did y'all know it's supposed to rain tomorrow? I know we sure could use it around here."

The genteel verbal hostess block that signals to the offender that it's time to switch gears. "Oh look at the time, we need to enjoy our desert. Y'all move on into the living room and I will bring it in there."

Or there's the passive aggressive attempt at a low-grade statement of disapproval. "Oh, I never know what you're going to say. You're always full of surprises!"

Southern women have perfected the art of conflict avoidance.

But certainly any of us can recognize ourselves in the impulse to avoid upsetting the apple cart or opening up Pandora's Box or spilling the beans or lowering the boom.

We've been taught to regard tension and conflict as bad, as chaotic, as signs of something being terribly wrong.

But Jesus has a very different model for us today. And I can think of no better time than the present for Christians in faith communities dominated by white ways of doing things and the mentalities of white culture, to really take this Jesus-centered model to heart.

The world needs something different from people like us these days—not avoidance of conflict, not glossing over things like racism, sexism, and homophobia, not smoothing things over so people never have to face hard truths, not normalizing bullying or lying or oppression.

The world needs us to not just be open to the truth, but to be willing to be changed by the truth.<sup>1</sup>

We need healthy ways to live with tension and engage in conflict.<sup>2</sup> We need life-giving opportunities to grow from the chaos that comes in spaces where there are competing narratives.

We need white-skinned people who are resilient enough to be challenged and transformed by conflict.

We need Christians who are willing to embody justice as the public expression of love.

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Jesus has every opportunity in our passage today to just enjoy a moment of praise and pride. His hometown synagogue is giving him some love.

Wow!! This is one of our homeboys! Joseph's son. Look at him—so grown up, so outstanding. Hey, I've heard he's been doing some amazing things out there in the world—and he's our hometown guy, so he'll probably give us the best of the best. He's going to put Nazareth on the map!

Jesus had them right there—nothing but positive vibes in the room.

And then, he has to go and ruin all these good feelings.

He says, "Soon, you all are going to say I am crazy." And then he schools them on God's plans for the world—God's grace extends beyond social and ethnic boundaries, God has already been making a habit of this kind of disruptive liberation. The two stories that Jesus references from Hebrew scripture about Elijah and Elisha are stories of Gentiles being healed, provided for, and embraced by God's grace.

Jesus knew it didn't have integrity to let his hometown synagogue remain in their obliviousness, in their delusion. He had to tell them the truth. And he knew they wouldn't like it.

And they didn't. They became enraged. They ran him out to the outskirts of town, to the edge of a cliff and they were ready to hurl him over the cliff.

Jesus stood in the midst of their rage and then proceeded to walk out right through the middle of them.

Jesus modeled some very important things for us, siblings in Christ, he modeled moral courage and spiritual groundedness.

He did not take on their rage as his own or as his responsibility. He let them keep their rage, their tension, their conflict, so that they could do the internal and communal work they needed to do.

In fact, he didn't seem to take it personally. And he didn't pick a fight to win it. He spoke truth to give them a chance to see themselves in it.

He was holding his people accountable to the truth of the Gospel. And to expend the energy it takes to be in that kind of tension and conflict, to expend the energy it takes to hold someone accountable, you have to love them. What other emotion would give you the energy you need to do that immense emotional labor with another person. <sup>3</sup>

The greatest asset we have at Grace Covenant is that we love each other. That love, centered in Christ's love, in God's love, in Spirit's effusive love, is what energizes us to be present with each other and share our true feelings. It is what allows us to risk being vulnerable, to risk being wrong, to risk being challenged, to risk being changed.

Conflict is really about trusting a relationship enough to bear that weight and not just survive it, but to thrive because of it.

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How do we hold each other accountable? How do we practice with each other the art of sitting with tension, the art of letting dissonance be a good thing? How are we honing our skills and our strength to take up space the way Jesus did in conflictual situations?

One small but persistent thing we do is use Mutual Invitation in our discourse with each other. Bible Study, Session meetings, Council meetings, Staff meetings—in any forum it is a way for us to practice these skills.

We don't interrupt each other. We let every voice have a chance to be heard. We resist the temptation to comment on everything other people say. We resist the temptation to not take the risk of sharing our true feelings when it is our time to speak.

The person who goes first is chosen by a random standard, not by who wants to go first or by whose got the most power in the room. This discursive practice may

seem like a tiresome thing to some, but it is making us better at the most important skill required for mutual liberation in our world today—sharing power.

Part of welcoming conflict is us acknowledging that we must, we must practice (not just value) true power sharing. And that means we lay down our need to be right all the time. We lay down our need to dominate a conversation. We lay down our need to control, to feel comfortable, or to prove we know everything.

Because we don't know everything.

And we won't know everything. No one does. And we'll never learn more than we already know if we don't learn how to stretch into the disruptions that help us grow.

The more voices we hear, the more stories we honor, the more tension we learn to befriend, the more we make ourselves available for who God is calling us to be—a community that's tamed our fear of tension enough to follow Jesus into the fray.

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Heffernan uses the language of needing to let truth change us in her Ted Talk [https://www.ted.com/talks/margaret\\_heffernan\\_dare\\_to\\_disagree?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/margaret_heffernan_dare_to_disagree?language=en)

<sup>2</sup> Three great Ted Talks about tension are great additions to this conversation and the practices involved in welcoming conflict. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FsFz1H447kk> [https://www.ted.com/talks/jonathan\\_marks\\_in\\_praise\\_of\\_conflict?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/jonathan_marks_in_praise_of_conflict?language=en) and see note 2.

<sup>3</sup> Heffernan ends her Ted Talk with a nod to the importance of love to engage in conflict. [https://www.ted.com/talks/margaret\\_heffernan\\_dare\\_to\\_disagree?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/margaret_heffernan_dare_to_disagree?language=en)