

St. David's Presbyterian Church
St. John's, NL
"The Loyal Opposition"
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All of us who have lived in our parliamentary democracy for any length of time have made personal observations on how well our style of government is working. How well do our federal and provincial governments work, from your point of view? That's what the reporter on the street might ask you. Our first response might be critical because there is always fault to find. But upon reflection, we might note that there are checks and balances in the system to correct the course of law making and spending our money wisely. There is the government and the opposition to the government. In our current federal situation, the number of opposition members is greater than the number of government members, which puts us in a minority government position with many challenges for government and opposition to work together or to send us back to voting, which might happen soon, and which also might bring us another minority. Who knows?

We do know the opposition is called "the loyal opposition," with loyalty, I presume, to the Crown, the Queen or the King. It certainly doesn't seem there is much loyalty to the government in this minority situation. In fact, if you have watched the federal parliament in person (how many have ever done this in Ottawa?) or on television, you will note that not only is there very little loyalty, but even less civility. People seem to have no problem speaking while a speaker is trying to speak or trying to shout a speaker down while he or she is hoping to communicate something relatively important. It brings to mind the book, All I Really Needed To Know I Learned In Kindergarten by Robert Fulghum." I remember his saying some pivotal things that all of our government leaders, at every level of government should revisit (and so should we). For instance, if you make a mess, clean it up. Or, if you have done something wrong, say you're sorry and ask forgiveness of the other person(s). Milk and cookies are good for you. So are naps (but not during the sermon time).

One of my points in bringing up this book is simply to say it is possible to be in opposition to the government (at all levels of government) and still be respectful, no matter what your political persuasion is. Wisdom and humility go hand in hand. But the book of James says, "Look out!" if you are giving into bitter envy (What do I mean by envy? =discontent or

resentment as you think about someone else's desirable possessions and qualities). Look out if your selfish ambition orientates your life. This is where disorder, criminal acts and evil practices like to harbour. Wisdom favours peaceful negotiation, mercy, impartiality, sincerity, being willing to listen to reason and appeal and to leaders (that's one interpretation of "submissive"), as well as being considerate of those on your daily path.

A wise person does not bowl another person over. It is the selfishly ambitious, envious person who wants their own way at almost all costs who tends to be the aggressive one. Conflicts often happen, whether at work, or in the church, or at home because of undealt with problems within ourselves rather than in the other person. I say this because it takes two or more people to argue, and so if you choose not to argue and not to escalate what is happening, you will find it often possible that your presence is a transforming one. But this means that you will have to do lots of homework on what's going inside you. In fact, James says that we quarrel often because we don't talk with God about what is going on inside us. Rather we talk with God to get stuff or promotions or power or the things which line up with our selfish ambition and envy rather than what God is trying to do.

And so we can fight for what we want. But look out for the loyal opposition. Because when we get into this mode, even as believers in Jesus Christ, we can find ourselves with God as our opposition. Then James reminds us that God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble and the oppressed. So look out when you find yourself as the rebel, and the self confident one who knows that everyone else is wrong. God too may be opposing you. Are you willing to hear the other person's point of view? Are you willing to pray with the other person, assuming they too are believers, and ask God to help you? You'd be surprised what this can do in the midst of conflict. James suggests we humble ourselves before God, and when we do so, that we will treat each other in a more peaceful and loving way.

In Psalm 1 today, we read and sang that we have a choice between giving into our sinful rebellion and be a mocker of God and all that is good, or, we can delight in what God says, and agree with God in our words and actions. Which way do we want to go? As God fills us up with God's love, we can continue to give away what we receive. But if we choose to go against this, and give in to selfish ambition or envy instead, the consequence is that we

have God as our loyal opposition. Sometimes, not all times, we go through difficulties to remind us of these choices.

One of the things all of us can do is begin to ask God and others that we trust what things in ourselves, what attitudes, what behaviors, what thought patterns need to be changed, so that we can grow in wisdom. Just asking someone else what things we might need to work on in ourselves is a courageous step. Sometimes we present ourselves to others as if we have it all together. But we know in the quiet spot before we go to sleep, or for some of us, right when we wake up, that we struggle usually in more than a few areas in our lives.

We struggle with stress. We struggle with lack of resources. We struggle to manage our time wisely, and not spend all our "extra" time on ourselves and our pleasure. We struggle with our weight, and staying healthy when we want to simply eat or do whatever we feel like, rather than what we know is best for our health. We struggle to exercise appropriately. We struggle to help others as we are able.

Or perhaps these are things with which I struggle.

We cannot be the perfect woman or man we want to be. The Proverbs 31 woman who seemingly is able to go through life 24/7 being wonderful at work, wonderful at home, wonderful at church also has challenges, hurts and things beyond her control. Did you notice how modern or post-modern that woman is? She is not the typical picture of a wife or woman in ancient Israel, yet there she is. She cares for the poor and manages her household well. But all of us, whether women or men, have struggles keeping it all together, work, home, play, church, community, arts, business, volunteering, you name it. Our lives have never been more freed up by the machines we use and the heat we have at our disposal and the food we have so plentifully, yet we hear so often how little time we have, and how fast time flies (I won't tell you how many shopping days left to Christmas, I'll let the fliers and the internet do that for me).

So what do we do when all these parts of our lives sneak up on us? If we can admit our need, and ask for help, we do very well. If we have friends we can talk to, or if we have community connections where someone will listen, that's a big part of dealing with the stress and the challenges we face. Sometimes we need to find appropriate professionals to receive counseling,

psychological or psychiatric help. There is no shame in this. Someone who receives help and is able to admit what areas of life he or she is struggling in, that is a strong, courageous person. It is also a person who will be more able to handle conflict and difficulties that arise just by breathing and sharing space with other human beings.

So we look to learn from our difficulties and we look to admit the truth about ourselves and others, no matter how difficult that becomes. And as we do, we experience anew the grace of God and the wonder of receiving love both from God and other human beings.

Let us pray.