

“Resistance Is Inevitable”
2 Corinthians 12:2–10; Mark 6:1–13
Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman
First Baptist Church, Raleigh
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Early on in my tenure in another setting, it was noted that no one said a negative thing about my predecessor. “What a shame,” I replied, eliciting a few raised eyebrows. I explained that while I never seek conflict, it is impossible to do effective ministry and avoid it. We have a high and holy calling which depends on healthy relationships, and a great deal of ministry involves non-conflictual teaching and pastoral care, but leadership in the church, not to mention faithfulness to the gospel, includes words of challenge which provoke resistance.

In his biography of Civil Rights leader Fred Shuttlesworth entitled *A Fire You Can't Put Out*, Andrew Manis includes these words from Shuttlesworth about the church's role in society.

[Religion] ought to have the same thrust that John the Baptist had when he went to tell Herod he was wrong... and when Elijah... challenged the 450 prophets [of Baal]. It's 'both/and.' It has to do with your prayer life and your living life and it also has to do with how you live, whether you are living under oppression. For it's never God's will... for oppression to be the order of the day anywhere... I always remember what Dr. [William Holmes] Borders said: 'The book of Acts is an action book. The gospel will get you in trouble; but God will get you out.' That's a true statement. And if you aren't... running over somebody's feeling, making and overcoming enemies, then it's not the gospel. (p. 220)

It may not be the first way we think about church, but we understand how central this perspective is to the pursuit of racial equality and many other justice concerns. We understand that the world around us is not as God desires it to be. But it's not just the world that falls short. We are not yet all that God intends us to be. We don't have

enemies in the church, and none of us possesses all the right insights and perspectives, but we do have a calling to grow up into Christ in every way, leaders especially have a responsibility to facilitate growth, and there is no way to do this without sometimes provoking resistance.

This reality begins with Jesus' ministry, as revealed in today's reading from Mark 6. Anyone who thinks that if we are doing what God wants us to do, everyone will be happy hasn't read the New Testament and paid attention to Jesus' experience. As the former Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, William Willimon, once said, the closer Jesus gets to the cross, the fewer people are around. The more he says and does what he is called to say and do, the more resistance he faces.

In today's reading, he meets resistance in his own hometown. The problem is familiarity. This is Mary and Joe's kid. They've known him since he was a pup. How could he be teaching in a way that is turning the world upside down and performing miracles. As a result of their questions and doubts, Mark says he cannot do any deeds of power other than a few simple acts of healing. Jesus is amazed at their unbelief.

But it's not just that Jesus meets resistance. His followers meet resistance too. He anticipates this when he sends them out two by two, giving them authority over the unclean spirits. He tells them to stay where they are welcome, but to leave where they are not, shaking the dust off their feet as a testimony against those who refuse their ministry. Mark says they go out and proclaim repentance, cast out demons and anoint with oil many who are sick and heal them. They do all that they can faithfully in Jesus' name where their ministry is received well, but it is not received well by everyone. Like Jesus, they meet resistance.

Of course, the truth is this is the way it goes with almost everything worth pursuing in life. Almost nothing worthwhile comes without some struggle and resistance — meaningful relationships, finding our vocational path, addressing significant social concerns, athletic or artistic accomplishments. Nothing that really matters comes easily. Resistance is inevitable. Struggle is part of the process.

Consider the founding of this nation which we celebrate today. We call this Independence Day because on July 4, 1776, the Continental

Congress ratified the Declaration of Independence which expressed the unanimous will of the body established two days prior. Many people seem to assume that it was all over on this day. There were challenges, we declared our independence, and we were independent. Anyone who knows anything about history realizes it took many more months and years to establish a clearly independent nation.

David McCullough's book *1776* documents the political intrigue and warfare of this one year in the process of the United States becoming a nation. It took labor and fortitude, insight and perseverance, and a willingness to sacrifice everything. As with the Civil War, families were divided, loyalties were challenged, and lives were lost. But those who passionately believed not only in economic and political independence, but in the freedoms protected by the First Amendment, including religious freedom, persevered through it all. They encountered resistance, but their cause was worthy, so they persevered.

Baptist minister Isaac Backus made this plea before the Massachusetts legislature on December 2, 1774.

Honored Gentlemen: At a time when all America are alarmed at the open and violent attempts that have been made against their liberties, it affords great cause of joy and thankfulness, to see the colonies so happily united to defend their rights; and particularly that their late Continental Congress have been directed into measures so wise and salutary for obtaining relief and the rights and freedom of the poor Africans. Since then the law of equity has prevailed so far, we hope that it will move this honorable assembly to pay a just regard to their English neighbors and brethren at home. (*A Documentary History of Religion in America – to the Civil War*, Edwin S. Gaustad, p. 254)

Backus went on to say that the Baptist churches in his province heartily united with their countrymen in the cause of freedom and were ready to exert all of their abilities to defend it. So, our forebearers were not only on the frontlines of fighting for a framework that could guarantee religious liberty; they were involved in the larger struggle for

freedom from all oppression. This struggle was not easy. It met great resistance. But they believed it was worth every sacrifice involved.

This political experiment, now 245 years old, still involves struggle and resistance. Maintaining a democracy is as difficult as building one. And it is not just a matter of fighting off external threats. The internal threats may be even greater in this time when in the name of partisanship or under the delusion of ideological certainty, some are willing to take steps that go against our national heritage. Standing up for freedom, for the basic right to vote, for honest exchanges of ideas, is not easy. But it is worth every risk and sacrifice involved.

Yet, in biblical tradition, while resistance is inevitable, it can also be helpful, at least at times, a kind of gift. In the reading from 2 Corinthians 12, the Apostle Paul talks about the challenges he faces in ministry. It is never a straightforward success, like King David's experience appears to be in the reading from 2 Samuel, though we know even David will face resistance and experience failure. But despite his best efforts and genuine faith, Paul has his thorn in the flesh.

Paul says he has personal weaknesses, but he also says he is the victim of insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities. To say that he meets resistance seems like an understatement! Yet he views all of this as a kind of gift that prevents him from becoming arrogant, one that reminds him that it is God, not Paul, who is in charge. "My grace is sufficient for you," the Lord says to him, "for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul sees struggle and resistance not just as inevitable parts of life or evils to overcome but as creative forces that mold and shape him into a humble vessel that is able to reveal the grace of God.

How might this perspective shape our understanding of struggle and resistance? A part of me resists even considering this perspective. Resistance is a barrier to overcome, it is an irritating inconvenience, but some resistance may be of God, and even that which is not can shape and mold us into more humble vessels of God's grace. When meeting resistance with a church proposal or justice endeavor, we often back down and give up or fight back in anger. What if we were to remain engaged in what we believe in, but without anger, with humility, seeking

to listen to those who resist while continuing to work for what we believe? Quite often this approach is the wisest and most effective.

In another setting, we encountered resistance to a community garden proposal from a person we expected to be the first volunteer. We hoped to grow vegetables and build community while doing so. This man was a gardener who loved people. We thought he was a guaranteed supporter, but he argued and voted against the project and a few people joined him. But rather than being angry with him, we listened to him, his concerns were addressed, and in the end, he supported the garden. It doesn't always work out so well, but a little humility can go a long way.

Our stories end on a happy note. Jesus meets resistance and anticipates that the disciples will too, but they proclaim repentance, cast out demons and cure the sick. Paul encounters hardships, but God's grace is sufficient in using him to spread the gospel. We will meet resistance, but it will not deny God's purposes in our lives. I think of Father Zossima's words in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Never be frightened at your own faint-heartedness in attaining love. Don't be too frightened overmuch even at your evil actions. I'm sorry I can say nothing more consoling to you, for love in action is a harsh and dreadful thing compared with love in dreams. Love in dreams is greedy for immediate action, rapidly performed and in the sight of all. Men will even give their lives, if only the ordeal does not last too long but is soon over, with all looking on and applauding as though on stage. But active love is labor and fortitude, and for some people too, perhaps, a complete science. But I predict just when you see with horror that in spite of all your efforts, you are getting further from your goal instead of nearer to it — at that very moment I predict that you will reach it and behold clearly the miraculous power of the Lord who has been all the time loving you and mysteriously guiding you. (p.58)

Resistance may be inevitable, but it is not final. The miraculous power of the Lord will always prevail. Love will always prevail.