

Hard Conversations
2 Samuel 18:5 – 9, 15, 19 – 33; Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2
Sunday, August 12, 2018

Years ago, Jen and I were sitting in a Dairy Queen, having dinner, when a woman named Donna walked in. Donna was about 80 years old, *really* sassy, she had a great, dry sense of humor, and she was a member of the church I was pastoring. We saw her come in and invited her to come over and join us. She walks over and says, “Well, pastor, I’ve got bad news.” She wasn’t the kind of person who *ever* had bad news, so I was concerned. She says, “I’m getting’ married!” I was *shocked* because, to my knowledge, she wasn’t involved with anyone, and that wasn’t even remotely on her radar. I’m sitting there stammering for words, like, “Donna?!” Then she says, “No, I’m just kidding. I’ve got *cancer!*” At that point I’m totally speechless. What do you *say* to that? Was I supposed to *laugh* or what? Eventually she said, “You really thought I was getting married? I’d *rather* have cancer!” That was her way of sharing bad news; to joke about it.

Now, compare that to a few months ago. I was driving to meet someone for lunch, when my uncle called my cell phone. It had been a few months since I talked to him, so I picked up and said, “Hey, Uncle Steve! How are you?” And I could tell right away by his voice that something was wrong. He said, “Well, Patrick, I need to tell you something. Are you in a place where you can sit down?” I said, “Well, actually, I’m driving, so I’m kind of already sitting down.” He said, “I’m going to need you to pull over.” I was in the middle of 202, so I was not about to pull over anywhere. I told him that it would be a few minutes before I was able to do that, and he says, “Okay, I’ll wait.” Then he sat there quietly for a few moments. I was like, “We’re not really going to *do* this, are we? It’s seriously going to be about five minutes or so.” Then he says, “Okay, why don’t you just call me back when you get to a place where you can stop and talk.” And I’m like, “You can’t do that! You can’t call me up all somber and say that

you have to tell me something and then just say, ‘Well, call me back!’ Just go ahead and tell me, because I have a feeling I know what it is anyway.” And I was right. He had called to tell me that my father had died. That was his way of sharing bad news.

We all have times in our lives when we have to have hard conversations and talk about things we’d rather not talk about. Whether it’s medical news, family news, giving our children “the talk,” critiquing or firing someone at work, talking about problems in a relationship, or talking to someone we love about an addiction or other problematic behavior. This is something that all of us have to face at some time or another, in some *way* or another. And we each have our own way of dealing with it. Some people joke about it. Some people dance around it. Some people are just very direct and straightforward and brutally honest. Some people just ignore it altogether. A lot of times, we *don’t* want to have those hard conversations because we don’t want to upset this other person. We don’t want to hurt them or worry them or make them angry at us. And so we’re willing to just let the problem go, ignore it, in order to avoid something uncomfortable.

This is one of the things that we see playing out in our reading from 2 Samuel. This isn’t a story that a lot of us are familiar with, and it’s easy to get lost in the details, so I want to walk through it with you real quick.

King David has a son named Absalom. Absalom has raised up an army against his father to try to take control of the kingdom of Israel. Despite all of that, David still loves his son. So as David’s army is preparing to go out and face Absalom’s army in battle to settle this whole thing, David tells the commanders of his army to “deal gently with Absalom.” He didn’t want his son killed. “Stop the rebellion, but take him alive.” They go out into battle, and David’s army wins.

Absalom is riding off on his mule, trying to make his getaway. The mule goes under a tree, Absalom's neck gets caught in a branch, and the mule keeps going, leaving Absalom hanging there (it's like something you see in a cartoon). David's soldiers come up, and they know, "We could end this right now. No more rebellion. Our guy is king." And they kill Absalom. Then they throw his body in a pit and cover him with stones. Not exactly what David told them to do.

So now they have to go back and tell David what happened. This one man, Ahimaaz son of Zadok says to the commander, "Let me run back and tell the king the he has won the battle!" He's excited to bring this good news back to the king. But the commander says, "No, I'm going to send this Cushite to go and tell the king what has happened." So the Cushite starts running back to bring the news to King David. Well, Ahimaaz is just too excited. *He* wants to be the one to make the king happy with the good news of his victory. So he says, "Let me go, too! I'll run after him." The commander relents and says, "Fine. You go, too."

So, Ahimaaz and the Cushite are running. Ahimaaz takes a shortcut, outruns the Cushite, and gets there first. He runs up to the king, crying, "All is well!" He tells King David that his army has won the battle. Good news! David says, "What about Absalom?" Ahimaaz knows that this news is going to upset the king, and he only wants to be the bearer of *good* news. So he says, "I don't know. When the commander sent me, there was something going on, some big commotion, but I couldn't see what it was."

Then the Cushite arrives. He says to David, "Good news! You won!" David says, "What about Absalom?" The Cushite says, "May all your enemies end up like him." A nice way of saying, "He's dead." And it *does* upset the king. He starts crying and wailing, so much so that eventually one of his commanders has to take him aside and say, "Hey, you've got to *stop* this."

But what we see here are two very different approaches to a hard conversation. Ahimaaz doesn't want to upset the king, so he dances around it and ends up not telling him the truth. The Cushite tells David the whole truth, even though it upsets him. Which one do you think we should strive to emulate – Ahimaaz or the Cushite? The Cushite, right? That we should *have* the hard conversations and tell people the whole truth, even when we know it's going to be difficult and painful and upsetting. There's a level on which we *know* that. This is nothing new.

But there are so many times that I have been with people who are going through something difficult – they're hospitalized or get a cancer diagnosis or lose a job – and they say, "We're not going to tell the kids yet. We don't want to worry them or upset them, and we really don't know that much yet, so there's nothing they can do." And my advice is always, "Tell them. How would *you* feel if *they* held something back from *you*? Yes, it might worry them and upset them, but I *promise* you, they would rather *know*. And there *is* something they can do. They can *pray*, and they can *love* you and *support* you and be here *with* you through this."

This is what it means to live life together – to be open and honest with one another, even when it's hard. To bear one another's burdens. To allow someone else to bear *ours*. To trust that, even though this is hard, God is going to give this person what they need to *handle* it. That *doesn't* mean that we get to say whatever we want to whoever we want, however we want. There's a time and a place for brutal honesty, but it's not *every* time and *any* place. How are we, as followers of Jesus Christ, called to have hard conversations? We all know that we *need* to have them from time to time. *How* do we approach them?

This moves us into Paul's letter to the Ephesians. Paul says, "Putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors." But just before this, he says, "We must no longer be

children...but speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body is joined and knit together...promoting the body's growth in building itself up in love." How do children speak if they need to have a hard conversation? They just *tell* you, right? They just *say* it. I remember this one time we were on the train or somewhere with our kids, and one of our kids (very young at the time) looks over at this woman sitting across from us and says, "Is that a *man*?" He saw something that he had a question about, so he just *said it*. Children have that brutal honesty.

But Paul says, "We must no longer be children...but speak the truth in love." *Have* hard conversations, *say* what needs to be said, but say it in a way that is patient and kind, not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude, irritable or resentful; say it in a way that does not rejoice in wrongdoing (doesn't *celebrate* the mistake this person has made or throw it back in their face) but rejoices in the truth; that bears with this other person, believes in them, hopes for them, endures with them. That's what Paul says love is. Say it in a way that actively seeks and promotes the wellbeing of the other. What he says in Ephesians is, in a way that "promotes the body's growth, building itself up in love."

Speak the truth to our neighbors, but speak the truth in love, in a way that seeks to build the other up because, he says, "we are *members* of one another." We are connected. We are bound to one another. We belong to one another. As one body, what you do and say to this other person, you do and say to *yourself*. Paul says, "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up...so that your words may give grace to those who hear." When we need to have those hard conversations, have them in a way that *gives grace* to this other person; that helps them experience love and kindness and forgiveness. That helps them *grow*. That helps us *all* grow closer together, into the people and the body that God created us to be.

This is a really simple idea, but it's something that we need to be reminded about from time to time because we lose sight of it. Don't be afraid to speak, but speak with love. Have those hard conversations, but have them in a way that reflects the love of God as we have experienced it in Jesus Christ. That takes thought, it takes reflection and preparation. It's not just something you do on the spur of the moment. It takes asking, "How can I talk to this person about this thing in a way that is loving and kind?"

Speak the truth, but speak it in love, in a way that actively seeks the good of the other and reflects the grace of God. Because then we can trust that God will be in the midst of our conversation, giving us all everything we need to get through it.