Why Do You Need to Talk to People You Disagree With?

Do I really need to talk to people I disagree with?

I’ve been thinking a lot recently about how easy it is for you and me to stop talking to one another when we don’t agree, especially now in times like these.

And, I’m wondering how many times in the past couple of months have you blocked or hid friends on Facebook after they posted that article or meme for the 40th time about a political idea you don’t agree with?

Or you’ve been leery of going home and sitting around a family dinner table because you know that (fill in the blank) will be there and say something you find offensive?

I know this much is true: lively, respectful, conversation is an art form that has grown harder and harder to engage in by the day.

Sharp edges are everywhere. We are all prone to shut down on arrival. It seems easier to keep our mouths shut and stick close to people like us.

I sat close to the story of the Samaritan woman in preparing a recent sermon and felt convicted all over again about Jesus’ example of what it means to be in conversation with people with whom I might disagree.

In John 4, Jesus and his disciples were on the road and they’re running low on supplies. The disciples take a detour into town to buy food, but Jesus hangs back to rest.

He looks for some shade and finds it close to a well when a woman approaches fetching water; a conversation between an unlikely pair begins!

I say unlikely because it would have been the cultural norm for Jesus just to ignore this woman. The writer does not even give us her name.

Jesus is a Jew from Galilee, and she is a woman from Samaria. Men and women who weren’t related at this time did not converse in public places. Nor did Jews
and Samaritans.

Yet Jesus engages her and carefully moves the conversation to the soul.

I read an article in my research by John Piper, a conservative theologian with whom I usually disagree, and his take on John 4 is no exception.

He describes her as a “worldly, sensually minded, unspiritual harlot from Samaria” and later he refers to her in his sermon as a whore. He makes the point that Jesus is lavishly lowering himself to her level.

Even if we don’t use such strong language about her as Piper does, I believe we’re also prone to look down on her too.

Many of us equate the Samaritan woman with a prostitute, even though the language of the text does not contain this word. Yet in our judgment, we overlook so much of the cultural context of this story.

David Lose, president of The Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia, explains, “She very easily could have been widowed or have been abandoned or divorced (which in the ancient world was pretty much the same thing for a woman). Five times would be heartbreaking, but not impossible.”

He continues, “Further, she could now be living with someone that she was dependent on, or be in what’s called a Levirate marriage (where a childless woman is married to her deceased husband’s brother in order to produce an heir yet is not always technically considered the brother’s wife). There are any number of ways, in fact, that one might imagine this woman’s story as tragic rather than scandalous, yet most preachers assume the latter.”

Jesus shows the way of love and offers dignity. We don’t hear him talking down to her, looking down on her.

A bridge of relationship forms because a conversation is not just an exchange of words between two people but a connection. An authentic connection.

Isn’t this what our world needs more of from us as people of faith?

Conversation partners who are willing to put barriers aside and just listen. Conversation partners who show up to listen and not judge. Conversation
partners who love before they’re quick to condemn.

“Many of us have so few friendships with others outside the church so that people see only the aggressive street evangelists or a pastor on the news who got caught in some scandal or who is being interviewed and saying some nutty things,” writes Dan Kimbell in his book, “Adventures in Church Land.”

He adds, “If people don’t see normal, day-to-day examples of real-life Christianity, then we shouldn’t be surprised if the scandals and the extreme voices end up defining their view of the church.”

In other words, what are we doing to be conversation partners with those who most need to be seen, loved and understood (even if they’re different from us)?

I believe keeping conversation alive is the way we live in these days. Who do you need to talk to?

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