

The Art of Holy Conversation

Teach Me the Words

*“Let the words of my mouth
and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you, O LORD,
my rock and my redeemer.”*

Psalm 19:14

Before beginning the journey in Leeds to serve as a minister in the British Methodist Church for one year, I was told, “Britain and the U.S.A. are two countries divided by a common language.” I was in Leeds less than thirty minutes when I began to understand the strange, yet fascinating, truth of that quote with the simple question, “Do you think the guitar will fit in the boot?” Puzzled by the question, I watched as the circuit steward opened the “trunk” of her car.

This moment marked my first phase of transition into a seemingly “strange” land, as I realized the adjustments and adaptation to the language and culture I must make. So began a significant learning journey for me, requiring me to translate, listen, slow down, pay attention, and browse a “Yorkshire Dictionary” until this new language became a part of who I am.

Whenever I talk with people who spent an extended amount of time abroad, their experiences are similar. One young woman was the top French student at her liberal arts college and confidently looked forward to her semester abroad. When she arrived, her confidence quickly faded and inevitably turned into frustration. She was taken aback when she could not identify some words and phrases, at times causing her to revert to hand pointing, sighing, and wandering around on her own. The art of conversation lost, she felt disconnected and alone.

Though she spent years with books and in the classroom mastering the language, culture, and history of the French people, it took more than her knowledge to help her communicate well and survive in this new context. She entered into relationship with her new neighbors, exposing her weaknesses, knowing this was the only way she could become stronger. Her desire shifted from learning the language for good grades to learning the language for people to understand. Her preparation gave her a solid foundation, but it was living it and continuous study within her new community that

helped the language become a part of who she is.

The Christian community is a particular group of people, who share a particular language and purpose for speaking. Our ultimate identity is in God, who chose to speak to humanity through words and more fully in and through the life of Christ. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God” (John 1:1-2). Our existence flows from the Word, the foundation of our common union and language. The Word commissions and invites us to speak, understanding the frailty and strength of words.

How do we master the skill of telling the story? How fluent are we in the language of Scripture that should inform our words?

Like any great artisan mastering his or her craft, it is important to learn the skills and knowledge of your craft. For Christians seeking to master the art of faithful conversation, Scripture is the well

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through which the Living Water is capable of taking us to a place of beauty. Scripture provides a litmus indicator, a basis for discerning the truth. Knowing the Word keeps our living faithful. As the psalmist David reminds us, the Word is a gift.

Meditating on the Word is a discipline by which the Spirit offers us a compassionate way of relating in the world, which prompts us to seek understanding of God and neighbor.

For example, when we read the great poets we are drawn to a place of knowing. To read Emily Dickinson and her attempts to captivate her thoughts and emotions through the written word, we begin to know her. Reading her authentic offerings draws us to a place of intimacy with her. The intimacy that one experiences with great pieces of written art is a mere glimpse of the deeper intimacy we can experience with God, transforming our hearts and minds.

In studying a craft, we also study those who mastered the art. For Christians crafting faithful words, Jesus is the master artisan. Every word Jesus communicated flowed from the very heart of God. Through Jesus, God gives God’s very self to us, teaching us how to speak life-giving, truthful, and transformative words, as well as teaching what conversations matter to God most.

Fluent in the language of the Word, Jesus’ life communicates in various ways grace and truth to all with ears to hear and eyes to see. He speaks in parables, taking the simple and familiar aspects of life to shed light on the Word, stirring the imaginations of the listener, regardless of their particularities. Jesus often answers questions

with a question, engaging the mind. His prayers are truthful utterances before God.

Jesus draws in the sand, sits with the untouchables, and fellowships with the most unlikely lot. He breaks the hold of deception, freeing people by truthful narration of their lives. Jesus communicates the ultimate importance of our relationship with God, manifested primarily through the way we enter into relationships with our neighbors and creation, conflicting often with the religious and social words of his day. Jesus speaks with authority, amazing and captivating the listener by the authentic compassion of his words. Every time we come to the Lord's Table, Jesus communicates to us through the bread and the wine. He articulates God's self-giving nature, inviting us into a self-giving communion with God and neighbor.

Do our words reflect this communion? If not, how can we begin to craft words that flow from the Word communicating self-giving, grace, and truth?

As a people, in whose hearts Christ has been set apart as Lord, our words should reflect the glue that holds us together. Our identity in God is manifested in a community of people who share a common language, creating opportunities to help each other speak truthfully and faithfully. A community composed of people who risk vulnerability by exposing where they are weak and what they do not understand, with hope that we might become strong. Christian education and discipleship ministries provide an opportunity for pastors and leaders to this.

We are surrounded by a cloud of witness. They are "like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper" (Psalm 1:3). Inviting Augustine, Julian of Norwich, Martin Luther King Jr., John Wesley, and others who share our common language and have allowed the Word to carry them to a beautiful place into the conversation is beneficial to the journey.

Life is not silent. It speaks loudly and with fervor. In a society constantly attempting to set the framework for our conversations—often leading to fragmentation, chaos, injustice, and forgetfulness—the church has the opportunity to bear witness to the Word that changed the world. In the midst of meaningless conversations and lies, the church can help narrate everyday life in ways that give birth to belonging, wholeness, meaning, and life.

At a Methodist probationer's retreat, the

leader, Ann Leck, shared an experience that imprinted her journey in ministry. While attending the 2001 Conference of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa as a representative from Great Britain, she witnessed a debate on the church's response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic wounding the country. Part of the expressed need included the church educating young people to prevent them from becoming infected. One woman, probably in her sixties, came to the microphone clearly feeling awkward before so many people. After a few seconds of standing in silence she simply requested, "Teach me the words."

After seconds of silence, she gathered courage to continue. She asked her church to teach her how to talk about sex and relationships to educate the young people.

Teach me the words.

At the heart of the woman's request is a desire to enter into deeper unity with a community of people bonded by a common language—to journey with a people who are daring to speak truthfully about all aspects of life and are serious about teaching people how to master the skill of telling our story. Her request is an invitation for the church to enter into an intimate space where our words flow from the Word by which we follow—an invitation to join a people seeking and hoping for redemption, willing to live into the story God is writing in the world, unashamed and dependent upon God to guide the pen.

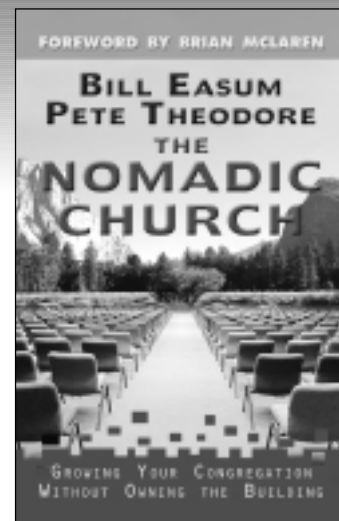
Who will teach the words? Who will risk the intimacy, time, and practices involved with having the conversation? Or, will we say nothing at all?

"And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples . . . And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'"
Matthew 28:18-20



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without owning
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