

HOLY CONVERSATIONS:

A CHARGE TO THE NEWLY INSTALLED AND ORDAINED AND AN INVITATION TO THE WIDER CHURCH
Is 42: 1-7; 1 Cor 1: 1-9

Sometimes it takes a committee. Actually, around here it takes several. If you're new to the Presbyterian Church (USA) or worshipping with us for maybe the third or fourth time, you might not be familiar with the joke, but Committees seem to be what it's all about. We have a committee for buildings, a committee for youth, a committee for transportation, a committee for education...we have a committee for knitting! About any time you get an idea, you're probably going to be told that it has to go past a committee. So you might want to be sure that you're up for a few meetings even before you *think*.

They're not a bad thing, these committees. They're just our denomination's way of giving many voices an opportunity to share in a decision-making process. But since we have all of these committees, they become an easy target for jokes among Presbyterians - coast to coast. Yes, we're all about committees...and committee meetings. (Fortunately, it gives our elders and deacons something to do in the weeks off between Session and Sunday mornings.)

Now, they can get tricky, these committee meetings. They can become tricky when a conversation amongst its members seems to be becoming a little less than holy. You can imagine it, can't you? Actually, maybe you've been a part of one such seemingly-less-than-holy conversation, yourself. One voice offers a strong comment, and another voice offers an equally strong response...the first voice tries to take control of the situation and the other voice either pushes back in or slides right out. Hardly is either side hearing the other's words; mainly, both sides hear the ambient gush of wind, hail and firestorm bouncing from wall to wall. In the end, everyone present is tense. Even if one side thinks it won, nobody is really satisfied. The conversation seemed less than Godly and the parting seems even more so. Not that this happens here; I'm speaking in generalities, of course.

Some of us are becoming increasingly impatient with conversations in churches that could be considered indistinguishable from conversations in secular settings. It's as if we think it's OK to divide the life of the church into a spiritual side and a business side. It's time to take the conversation back! One of my favorite Congregational theologians says, "We want God in the entire meeting, not just the opening prayer!"¹

Secular rules of conversational engagement or even Roberts Rules of Procedure are great until we begin to actually value *efficiency* over an intentional engagement of *the Holy Spirit*. Or, in other words, when we focus on the business of our conversations over the spiritual health of our conversation partners. This creates a system of winners and losers rather than spirit of cooperation amongst loving believers. An alternative course of engagement would be when we actively attend to the Holy Spirit in conversation with us – any conversation –and “we (actively) seek to discover what God is doing (with us or with the situation and then we actively seek) what God would have us do in response.”² When we intentionally engage the Holy Spirit in our conversations, our Congregational friend, Martin Copenhaver, says, we “listen to one another not just out of respect but because one can never

¹ Copenhaver, Martin B., “Decide or discern” found in *Christian Century*, December 28, 2010, p 29.

² Copenhaver, Martin B., “Decide or discern” found in *Christian Century*, December 28, 2010, p 30.

know who the Holy Spirit will choose to speak through on any given occasion. In our spiritual conversations we listen carefully for God who is certain to be speaking through one of the least of these. Diana Butler Bass, an American Religion Historian, believes that for us to truly integrate this way of engaging with one another will take a cultural movement back to the practices of the early church. I see this as a time when members honored one another for the holy contributions each offered, conversations were open and spiritually engaging, and each participant embraced the potential prophet in every living soul. Butler-Bass calls it “retraditioning.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Today’s text is the preamble to Paul’s first letter to the people of Corinth. It’s easy for us to gloss over this introduction like a lot of us gloss over introductions to most books. We open Corinthians and read words like grace and peace and ignore them as if they’re little more than niceties – especially since Paul uses these and similar words as his greeting in virtually all of his letters. But, to be honest, generous greetings and complements are more than a little out of place in the context of the Corinthian church. At the time of Paul’s writing, the Corinthian church was rife with division and what you *could* label immoral behavior. Bottom line? The Corinthians didn’t treat each other very well. Yet Paul *appears* to heap praise on them. But you know, Paul actually *is* heaping praise upon them, but it’s praise with a purpose.

Grace to you and peace from God is more than a greeting from Paul. It’s a call to a certain way of life. As Paul wrote, it’s a way of life that we’re called to follow as Christians who are saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord. It’s a way of life that we’re called to follow in honor of the grace of God that has been given us in Jesus. It’s a way of life that brings us peace as we rest in the knowledge that God has given each of us a spiritual gift that when joined together with others creates a church whose whole is greater than the sum of its parts. We have exactly what we need to stay strong and testify to the power of our Savior among us not only within our particular church community but in the world. When we honor the grace of God, we honor those whom God has called into this community of grace. We honor one another in all of our conversations and we realize that each of us has a meaningful contribution given to us by our creator God for the uplifting of Christ’s church.

And if this is how we’re *called to be* and *can be* as a church, imagine how Christians can become transforming agents in the *wider* world where exchanges aren’t grounded in prayer and conversation partners are rarely professing to be Godly in their righteousness. As Christians, you and I *are called* to extend the meeting of the church beyond the bounds of our experience here and into every corner where there is conflict and injustice of any and every kind. With our prayerful reflection in the church and in the world, we are able to affect a kind of redistribution of power that Jesus, himself, and the earliest church followers engendered.

I am hard pressed to think of a finer, modern day example of one who has effectively empowered the secular (and the celestial) world in prayerful reflection than the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. In large part due to Dr. King, churches across the nation unified against discrimination of every form. Through Dr. King’s prayerful, public engagements with critical issues, non-violent, prayerful protests confronted bigotry and hypocrisy to affect a grand turnabout of mindset from north and south, east and west. Through Dr. King’s preaching in the streets of anxious communities and proclamation from the steps of landmark buildings he motivated millions around the world just as his impassioned, prophetic words continue to motivate so many of us today. One of his speeches, “Loving Your Enemies”,

preached on November 17, 1957 – the early years of the Civil Rights Movement, seems to be particularly salient today.

“...an individual must realize that there is some good (in every person) and look at those *good* points which will over-balance the *bad* points.

“... each of us is something of a schizophrenic personality. We’re split up and divided against ourselves. And there is something of a civil war going on within all of our lives. There is a recalcitrant South of our soul revolting against the North of our soul. And there is this continual struggle within the very structure of every individual life. There is something within all of us that causes us to cry out with Ovid, the Latin poet, "I see and approve the better things of life, but the evil things I do." There is something within all of us that causes us to cry out with Plato that the human personality is like a charioteer with two headstrong horses, each wanting to go in different directions. There is something within each of us that causes us to cry out with Goethe, "There is enough stuff in me to make both a gentleman and a rogue." There is something within each of us that causes us to cry out with Apostle Paul, "I see and approve the better things of life, but the evil things I do." So somehow the "isness" of our present nature is out of harmony with the eternal "oughtness" that forever confronts us. And this simply means this: That within the best of us, there is some evil, and within the worst of us, there is some good. When we come to see this, we take a different attitude toward individuals.

“The person who hates you most has some good in him; even the nation that hates you most has some good in it; even the race that hates you most has some good in it. And when you come to the point that you look in the face of every man and see deep down within him what religion calls "the image of God," you begin to love him in spite of. No matter what he does, you see God’s image there. There is an element of goodness that he can never sluff off. Discover the element of good in your enemy. And as you seek to hate him, find the center of goodness and place your attention there and you will take a new attitude...”

Dr. King wants us to know how important it is to love every person, to listen to every voice, to honor how God might be speaking through the least likely among us who’s telling us what God needs us to know in a given place and time. Dr. King wants us to know how God calls us to value each child of God as a beloved and potentially prophetic voice for God’s purpose.

Who do you tune out who might otherwise offer you the holiest words for improving a situation, if not the world?

For me? It’s Nancy Grace. Flip to CNN and she’s there? I turn off the station about as fast as I turned it on. Maybe it’s the camera angle, or maybe it’s her voice, or maybe it really *is* something she says – or doesn’t say - but Nancy Grace is the one I won’t listen to. Ever. Now, she might very well have a word that I need to hear. She very well might have just the story that God wants me to know so that I can live my life more faithfully, heal some of the pains of our community more effectively, support some of the longings of our membership more completely. But there’s no way I’ve been about to spend what little precious time I have at the end of the day listening to her rant. So if you hear it from Nancy and you think it

would be important for me to know, please pass it along because I'm just not going to get it if it's straight from her on CNN. Nancy Grace. Oy.

Who are *you* failing to hear? Who are you tuning out whose voice might just be the prophecy you need most? Who are you challenged to recognize as one through whom God might choose to send a prophetic word? We can't know in advance who that might be, and so you and I need to attend carefully to men and women – even children – in as many contexts as there are surrounding us, for their word might be intended from God's lips to our ears.

The wider world listened to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, and the wider world took a turn for the better. Thanks be to God. Dr. King, we all know, was murdered in the process. Being a prophet is risky business. This is one more reason why we need to engage the Holy Spirit in our conversations before we begin. But Dr. King's family recognizes the important role he played around the world in the civil rights movement, and the church continues to recognize the important role he still plays in our communities and conversations today.

In our worship service this morning, we lift up The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a prophet: one who opened his mouth and a word from God came out. This afternoon and tomorrow, Interfaith Clergy Councils and Ecumenical groups all around our area - from Oakland and Franklin Lakes to Glen Rock and Ridgewood - will be gathering to honor this great civil rights leader as he's been honored around the world for decades. This is small testimony to the strength of this prophet's lasting message for us all.

Opening ourselves to the potential prophet in our midst is truly countercultural. It takes prayer; it takes silence. It takes patience and it takes an openness to hear over a desire to close the open spaces. It takes individual courage to let the conversation and its potential outcome not be "about me" – which means that sometimes, it could become about "him."

Who in the world are you tuning out, turning off, walking away from or otherwise ignoring who could be offering you the wisest words for your life? When are you engaging in conversation only to win your point and not to prayerfully discern from whom God is calling you to learn and what God is calling you to learn?

As we strive to follow the life of Christ in our church halls as well as our home and our office and social spaces, may we be especially mindful that God calls us to live the gracious and peaceful life of our Lord, attending to each member of the body as a valued, potential prophet in our midst. And may we be open ourselves to the holy conversations that emerge within our groups, our communities and our world.

Thanks be to God.