

Engaging in the Lives of Others

My concern with the call to love lies with the consideration of how we engage. I'm not referring to the intellectual understanding of our commonality and differences, which is important, but guidance with the heart. As a counselor, the number of people I've sat with who have been damaged people of the church is immense. It always gives me pause to reflect on my presence with others, and I strongly believe that how we hold our beliefs is just as important as the beliefs we hold.

*Here are a few thoughts on engaging others. Maybe heart prep or pre-dispositional work as we consider loving others. They are an intermix of my own and perspectives from the authors of a few books, *Suffering and the Heart of God*, *Adventure and the Way of Jesus*, and *The Listening Life* in particular. - Kent & Nancy*

"If I'm to love you, I cannot love you in abstraction. I can only love you to the degree I am allowed, permitted, and honored to enter your story. To enter into another's story you need to have a philosophy of taking off one's shoes."
- Dan Allender

How do we enter another's story?

How did Jesus enter ours?

- o He came down (Phil. 2)
- o Jesus entered our broken and suffering humanity by leaving heaven, emptying himself, taking on our likeness, taking on our experience, and coming in the form of a servant
- o He leaves the higher and descends. He leaves beauty and enters chaos. He leaves pure and goes into filthy
- o The incarnation suggests if you want to lead and love others you must first make yourself like those you are leading...
 - You must know their pace, their thoughts, their fears, their suffering, their needs
 - Sometimes it means you lay aside your talents and thought to walk at their pace

Practically what does this look like?

- o Listening
- o Hearing is an act of the senses, but listening is an act of the will.
- o Servant listening is a practice of presence, in which we set aside what might distract us and what we think should happen in a moment or conversation. It is an act of humility, in which we acknowledge that no matter who we are listening to, we come to learn
- o Servant listening is an act of surrender, in which we lay down our verbal weapons our preconceived notions, our quick advice, and our desire to steer the conversation toward ourselves. We release our grasp on the terms and direction of the conversation.
- o Somewhere along the way speaking our minds has taken a priority over listening
 - We assert our identities and can approach others as projects rather than unique people with stories to be heard
 - We can crystallize our beliefs and cease to really enter, consider another's view, and ask questions
 - A major obstacle to our listening abilities is that most of us believe we are already good listeners.

- o We learn how to listen because we want to learn how to love
- o *How would our relationships change, how would we change, if we approached every situation with the intent of listening first?*
 - Listening itself has the power to be transformative
 - “Preach the gospel at all times, and if necessary use words.” ~ St. Francis

By recognizing and acknowledging imbalances of power and privilege

- o If we are white, if we are Christian, if we are middle to upper class we are perceived, and unfortunately often live, as higher.
- o “I’ve come to believe that the true measure of our commitment to justice, the character of our society, our commitment to the rule of law, fairness, and equity cannot be measured by how we treat the rich, the powerful, the privileged, and the respected among us. The true measure of our character is how we treat the poor, the disfavored, the accused, the incarcerated, and the condemned.” ~ Bryan Stevenson
- o We enter in humbly, and we hold up the others dignity, particularly with those who are marginalized and viewed as lessor, and we listen

Through humanity first

Our shared humanity, needs, desires, and suffering are our common ground

Through creating safety

“[Communities] that create a place of safety where people come and find acceptance of who they are regardless of where they may be in life... offer members the critical abilities needed to develop their identities. The abilities to listen, wait, be honest with self and others, confess, and grow...are developed as much by how we talk to and treat others as in what we talk about.” ~ Greg Robinson

Through seeing and holding the other as “us” and not a “them”

One of the great lessons of the story of the prodigal son(s) unfolds is that the division is not between the righteous and the unrighteous as the Pharisees imply. It is between us and God. There is only one holy, and both the prodigal and the elder brother need God.

Willing to be disrupted

- o We live in a broken and suffering world to which we can easily numb and look away from
- o Trauma, the recurrent tormenting memories of atrocities witnessed or borne, is perhaps the greatest mission field of the twenty-first century
- o Our usual response to atrocity is to try to remove it from our mind
 - Those who have been traumatized want to flee the memory of its occurrence
 - We who hear it want to flee also as traumatic stories threaten our comfort, our position, our system
- o Are we willing to enter in to the trauma of others as we hold the compassion, heart, and love of God inside us?
- o Are we willing to be broken as we engage and enter in to other people’s brokenness?
- o The push-pull between the need to forget and the need to speak is the central dialectic of trauma
- o Christianity doesn’t stay clean and separate, it touches the untouchable, dines with the outcasts, and enters the dung heaps of life and of the heart

Willing to learn

o “[Personal] and spiritual growth is the result of a deep learning at the level of assumptions and emotional response. We cannot become clear about the assumptions we make or the manner in which we react until those things are reflected back to us in our contact with others, and in particular those who differ from us. Many [communities] have an unspoken agenda, aiming to get everyone believing the same things and living the same way. [We’ve] done a poor job of creating containers or an environment where people of different perspectives come to know and learn together. The result is [communities] that work against the maturing of the members.” ~ Greg Robinson

“If I insist on giving you my truth, and never stop to receive your truth in return, then there can be no truth between us.” ~ Thomas Merton