

MESSAGE Holy Conversations – Know Thyself
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Let's begin.....how do we even begin to have good conversations, let alone holy conversations? I would like to propose that we begin with ourselves. I know, it's easier if we can begin with someone else...."if they would just understand..." "she doesn't get it". But the Christian journey always includes an inward journey into our own selves. So I am going to say a few phrases. As I do, I invite you to close your eyes and pay attention to what is happening inside yourself as you hear these things.

Black Lives Matter

Mask Mandate

All Lives Matter

Open borders

Personal Freedoms

Conservative

Liberal

COVID vaccines

9/11 attack

Jan 6 insurrection

CNN

Fox News

Gun control

Social media

Ok. Had enough?

Did you experience a strong emotion? Did your heart rate or blood pressure increase? Could you identify anger, frustration, or your body tightening up just simply by hearing some words or phrases?

If so, there is nothing wrong with that. It means you are human. Humans are emotional creatures. Emotion: a physical response to a thought. Some of our emotional responses are rather wonderful....like happiness or contentment. Some of those physical responses are pretty strong and driven by a part of us that has to do with survival. The amygdala activates the fight-or-flight response by sending out signals to release stress hormones

that prepare your body to fight or run away. This response is triggered by emotions like fear, anxiety, aggression, and anger.

Emotions in and of themselves are neither good nor bad. It's how we react to our emotions that can lead to trouble and the tearing down of community. But there is hope as we will hear in today's lesson:

Galatians 5:13-26

¹³ You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. ¹⁴ For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." ¹⁵ If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

¹⁶ So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. ¹⁷ For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. ¹⁸ But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

¹⁹ The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰ idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹ and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. ²⁴ Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. ²⁵ Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶ Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

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The apostle Paul wrote this letter understanding that the church in Galatia was dealing with some community and faith issues. They were experiencing some deep conflicts and disagreements in which people had strongly held opinions and thoughts. Sound familiar? How they dealt with those disagreements and conflicts had the power to either tear the community apart or hold the community together.

I don't know if the people back then understood the brain's amygdala, but it is obvious that Paul understands that the human emotional response can be destructive if we let it. He talks about them as the desires or the acts of the flesh. And they have the power to

destroy community. While we might focus on the first few: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery...those might quickly jump to mind and we think: yes of course! Shame on the sexually immoral and the partiers. But we need to continue and also read that included in the acts or desires of the flesh include hatred, discord, fits of rage, dissension, and factions.

These are what our world is experiencing; what we are experiencing right now.

Think back to the flashpoint words we began with and the experience of your emotional response to them. Can you understand how those strong emotions could lead to hatred? To discord? To fits of rage? To dissension? And factions? I believe this is exactly what we are seeing happening in the world. This is exactly what made me wonder: Isn't there a better way? Can't the church be and do something different? Shouldn't the church model this?

And so I began this conversation with some folks in our congregation almost a year ago now and asked them to explore what kind of resources there are that can help us deal with our differences better. Kevin Williams is a part of that small group that explored this very topic. They found a resource called "Living Room Conversations" they used to help guide them to have holy conversations around simple topics as well as more difficult topics. Listen to some of Kevin's observations:

Second video -- :15 – 3:04

Kevin testifies to how the emotional process can break relationships and bring about broken community. But he also attests to something greater: he asks us to question what our goal is: is it to win an argument or is our goal to grow in our relationships? If it's to win an argument, then there will be no such thing as Christian community because we will have cut ourselves off from each other.

But if its to grow in our relationships, then we need to live by something more than the desires of the flesh. We need to live by the Spirit.

And honestly, that's tough. Its living by what doesn't necessarily come naturally to us – like living according to the flesh does.

Living by the Spirit means we need to love one another. That's not love the emotion, that's love the act of self-sacrifice.

It means patience....forbearance, giving someone time and space

It means peace....seeking common ground

It means kindness and gentleness....just because we don't agree doesn't mean I need to use mean words or be mean

It means self-control....literally, not giving into acting on my emotions.

What I believe is the first step in having a crucial or holy conversation is to understand ourselves better. Understand what pushes our buttons. Understand the strength of our emotional response. And then practice a higher way. A better way. The Spirit's way.

Let's enter into a time of prayer, confessing both our brokenness and our need for God's help.

Let us come before the Lord in humility and penitence.

**Merciful God, for the times we have lived according to the desires of our emotions, forgive us.**

For the words we have spoken without thoughtfulness, forgive us.

**For the times we have reacted without first seeking understanding, forgive us.**

For the times we have withdrawn care from those who frustrate us -

**Forgive us, for we are a people divided against ourselves, clinging to the values of a broken world instead of the values of an eternal kingdom. Set us free through the Holy Spirit that we may live more fully with each other and you. We pray in Jesus' holy name. Amen.**

Hear the good news: while it is true that we have sinned, it is a greater truth that we are forgiven through God's love in Jesus Christ. To all who humbly seek the mercy of God I say, in Jesus Christ you are made new.

**Thanks be to God.**