

We Need to Talk...

Wanda Burton-Crutchfield, August 8, 2010
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We have a phrase in our family that is a shorthand descriptor that encapsulates a lot of information in one short terse word: *defunct*. It was first etched into our family dictionary in year one or two of John and my, now, fourteen years of marriage. I was called “spatially defunct” to describe my challenges in reading maps, remembering (or lets face it, even giving a hoot about) highway numbers, and all around being really good at getting lost. I am spatially defunct. The phrase works better if pointed at someone else, “you are spatially defunct!”

I want to borrow this beloved word, *defunct*, from the Burton-Crutchfield lexicon to confess something to you all this morning. Throughout a good portion of my life, and even in moments on certain days, I am, to put it mildly, *relationally defunct*. Partly because by nature I tend toward analysis and emotional distance and in part because I was raised without some of the niceties others take for granted being in play, I had to learn how to say things like “thank you,” “we” instead of “I,” and “it’s good to see you, today.” It took a few more years to learn how to mean it.

I can hear you kind people, “No, Wanda, you really are a lovely person. I find you quite pleasant.” You are absolutely right! I am nice, *now*. It just took a little bit of work to get here.

Because I am on the relationally challenged side of the spectrum, I cannot even begin to tell you how many annoying times I have been on the receiving end of the phrase, “We need to talk.” Whether it was a date freaked out because I giggled during the movie, “Silence of the Lambs,” a boyfriend who offered up the second-most overused phrase in dating vocabulary, “it’s not you, it’s me,” or a friend needed to challenge me for steamrolling right over her without my having a clue, I know the phrase “we need to talk...” when I hear it.

Imagine my surprise when I heard God uttering this phrase, “we need to talk,” or at least a more God-like version in the passage from the prophet Isaiah we read today. “Come let us reach an understanding,” says the Lord” in verse 18. Translations other than the Tanakh have a similar vibe. Verse 18 in the New Revised Standard Version says, “Come now, let us argue it out” and Today’s English Version offers, “The Lord says, ‘Now, let’s settle the matter.’” God is angry with the people of Judah in our lesson for today.

In the eight verses that precede God’s “we need to talk” line, God speaks to the people through the prophet Isaiah laying out all the reasons God is ticked. “Listen to me, you...” God’s snit-fit begins. Then God likens his beloved children to the most heinous people that came to mind, “chieftains of Sodom,” and “folk of Gomorrah” (Isaiah 1:10). Citing the inhabitants of those cities was used for a very specific reason in the time of the prophet. In our time, the crime of this city has been misconstrued and besmirched to label homosexuality as a heinous crime. I would imagine hearing these cities cited this morning gave many of us pause. Unlike our companions in church or political life who misuse these labels, I invite you to read the actual story of Sodom and Gomorrah that is found in the book of Genesis. (Genesis 13, 14, 19) The city was not destroyed so as to condemn people created in the image of God whose relationships are beautiful and blessed by God. Hear this word, my gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, trans-gendered, and straight friends, all our relationships are blessed in the sight of God.

Comparing someone to the folks in Sodom and Gomorrah, the archetypes of sinfulness and incorrigible wickedness, was a way to say one deserved to be utterly punished at the hand of God: fire *and* brimstone. Remember, the true sin attributed to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah was that they were cruel to strangers. They did not relate to people outside their circle well. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah were punished for their inhospitality to the whole of God’s people. They thought they deserved to exclude those who were different. That is why they fried. Ironic, no?

Then God through the prophet begins to detail the religious ceremonies, festivals, and acts the people of Judah were engaging, in their minds, to connect with God. “”What do I need with this stuff?”” God seems to say in a huff (v11). “That you come to appear before Me” verse 12 offers, “Who asked that of you? Trample My courts no more.” The image that comes to my mind is of a woman in homemade apron who has scrubbed her linoleum floors only to have her sons and daughters come flying through the kitchen chasing one another and so enrapt by their own game that they do not notice the destruction in their wake. “I can’t even look at you,” verse 15 seems to say. Is all hope lost for the people of God in this story?

Though God is ready to have a serious conversation, “We need to talk...” indeed, God offers an opportunity for correction. Verses sixteen and following says, “Your hands are stained with crime—Wash yourselves clean, put your evil doings away from My sight. Cease to do evil; learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice; aid the wronged. Uphold the rights of the orphan; defend the cause of the widow” (v 16-17). “Straighten up and fly right,” the Lord seems to say. You can come home again. It is possible to fix this mess. You have it in you to do what is right. Rather than break up, God is asking for a new start. It is time for a purge.

The people of God in this passage and in the time captured by the prophet Isaiah have “grown ignorant of their relationship with God” according to a scholar on this text (Sheppard, 550). They have become relationally defunct. They seem to be doing all the right things but their hearts are in the ceremony, the play of it all, but not in being the embodiment of what relationship with God looks like. “For where your treasure is, there will be your heart will be also” the gospel offers (Luke 12:34).

Being in a relationship is hard. Dropping one’s mask long enough to let another see the true face is not for sissies. Inviting, maintaining, navigating, and mending relationships with other beings in our world, and even with our world itself, takes time. And yet, that is what we are called to do and be. We are made for connection, community, bonhomie, and relationship. My work as a chaplain is all about assessing how connected the recipient of my care is: with God, with family, with community, with something larger than oneself, so that the person can draw from that resource to gain perspective, peace, healing, and hope. The chaplain often stands as the surrogate connection while a person sorts the frayed edges of a day, a week, a diagnosis, a tragedy, a life into the story they want for themselves.

I believe facilitating relationships has been a unique part of my call as a member of this body of believers. Small people, tall people, warped people, curious people, lost people have been brought before my eyes by a God who saw them as well. I came to Binkley from a place where I was relationally defunct. It was not working. Elizabeth Stroop, my beloved chaplaincy education supervisor, reminded me, “Whether you like it or not, you do need people, Wanda. And people need you.” We all need to be in relationship with other humans to even begin to figure out what it means to be a child of God and approach that relationship.

The phrase, “we need to talk...” has been used in some hideous ways in my life. And yet, there was one dinner in a weird little diner in Richmond called Freckles, where the phrase was used in lovely vulnerability. “I love you,” the brave man said to me, and then he taught me how to say it back. We all need someone in our life that will do that, love us, and reach through all the shields to invite us to love back. We need to be that person who is willing to risk loving another or several others, if we take the Scripture seriously. Now that is a purse that will not wear out! “We need to talk...” because I love you. Amen.

Sheppard, Gerald T. “Isaiah 1-39.” Harper’s Bible Commentary. James L. Mays, ed. Harper & Row Publishers: San Francisco, 1988.