

# Difficult Conversations

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Not long ago I became engaged in a political argument with a family member. We were “not on the same page.” It was more like we were in different libraries! It quickly grew acrimonious. It was clear there would be no satisfactory shared understanding and we moved on to other topics before any blood was spilled. Yet I was bothered by my own anger and the dearth of common ground that made our positions seem so irreconcilable! How can we listen to each other in the midst of such polarized, partisan and often toxic political discourse?

Jesus’ ministry was not characterized by everyone singing “Kum-ba-Yah” around the campfire. In fact, conflict and rancor abound throughout the Bible. But time and again Jesus speaks or an angel speaks to those who are beleaguered: “Be not afraid.”

It occurs to me that more often than not, anger is really a misplaced expression of fear. Or put another way, anger sometimes arises to protect us from our fear. So as I reflected on our heated political conversation, I had to ask myself, “What am I afraid of?” And just as important, “What is he afraid of?”

If this were a panacea for all contentious interactions, I would be on the cover of *Time* magazine! But in light of the faith professed by my Christian tradition, I am finding it helpful to be as aware of my fears and the fears of the other as I am aware of my own political convictions. In fact, just naming my fears begins to diminish their power and gives me greater insight into the unspoken fears of others.

Another helpful image for finding common ground comes from Charles Swindoll, author of *Stress Fractures*. It involves adjusting our pattern of listening. Swindoll recounts a time when he was burdened with too many commitments in a short span of a few days. He became nervous and tense about it, snapping at his wife and children, wolfing down his food at mealtimes and overly irritated with interruptions through the day. He says, “Before long, things around our home started reflecting the pattern of my hurry-up style.” He distinctly remembers one evening after supper when his young daughter wanted to tell him something important that happened in school that day. She began hurriedly, “Daddy, I want tell you somethin’ and I’ll tell you really fast.” Suddenly, realizing her frustration he answered, “Honey, you can tell me and you don’t have to tell me really fast. Say it slowly.” He never forgot her reply: “Then listen slowly.”

In this age of politics steeped in fear and tone-deaf to contrary positions, I am finding it helpful to “listen slowly.”

The next time I find myself in one of those difficult conversations, I intend to listen slowly to my own fears, then listen slowly to the fears of the other person. Finally I will listen slowly to Jesus’ encouragement to those who would follow him: “Fear not.”

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