

## ***Keeping In Mind: On Dialogue***

### ***Introduction:***

Well, People of God. We're nearing the end of this potpourri series. Next week we'll talk about "authenticity" and then move into Advent, that season of remembering Jesus' first arrival and looking forward to his return.

Today we're talking about identity, really...although it's identity-by-way-of-dialogue. I want to look at what it means to be people who engage with other people, and what it means to be ourselves as we do it. As Paul says, "You know these things, but it doesn't trouble me to say them again."

First...let's pray!

### ***Prayer:***

Today's message—this thinking about dialogue and identity—it's a hard one for me for a couple of reasons.

### ***Reason: Fatalism***

The first--and I'll just be vulnerable with you all--is that I don't feel an enormous amount of hope when it comes to dialogue anymore. Maybe I will again? I don't this morning.

A dialogue is a conversation, of course. A give-and-take in

which we try to come to some sort of agreement about something, even if the agreement is only that we understand the person we're talking with more fully than we currently do.

And every conversation risks conversion. Does that make sense? Every conversation comes with the potential for conversion. And by and large, we've done our converting. We don't want to be converted to anything.

We want to be inspired. We want to be a little uncomfortable, maybe, but in a way that leaves us basically able to continue on with our lives and opinions and preferences unchanged. I just don't believe we're in a time of great dialogue. I don't know when the last time of great societal dialogue was; maybe it happened before I was born?

Because right now we're doing what I honestly think humanity has always done, which is retreat into identity tribalism. We're retreating into a way of living that has more or less marked humanity since its beginning: clustering together with whichever group we're aligned with, and continually dismissing those who we've turned away from.

And People have always done this. In the past we were almost exclusively born into our groups. More recently in our society we've empowered people, as we think of it, to choose

membership in an in-group. Group identity isn't passed on at birth; it's claimed by an individual.

But to choose membership in an in-group is necessarily to find there are a lot of out-groups, a lot of "them over there," that we inherit at our choosing. We join with an "us," and that brings "them" with it.

But this also means that groups are competing, all the time, for our alliance, our alignment, ourselves. We're in an age of identity tribalism, and with it becomes a great, heaping distrust, derision, and dismissal of every perspective, statement, reason, or word that comes from those who belong to the out-group. We don't trust a word that comes from them over there, from the others, because to trust a word from them is to risk our very identity as a member of the group we've chosen.

And with all this in play, I just simply think that right now no one wants to dialogue with anyone about anything. And it's not because we're closed minded, or selfish, or young, or unaware. It's because our allegiance is constantly, constantly being competed for. Every group everywhere is asking for our loyalty. And we just don't have the energy, I think, to deal with that. It's easier to retreat into our in-group's echo-chamber, distrust whatever message they over there try to send, and if we speak at all, speak words of condemnation.

We know, somehow, that every conversation has the potential for conversion and we don't have the energy for our ideas, our concerns, or worries to be converted. We don't have the flexibility, the courage, or the conviction to be open to change. We've retreated into identity tribalism, and part of our core identity has become defending the rightness of our choice and the wrongness of everyone else's.

Because of these realities, it's been hard for me to discern how to talk about this well.

### ***Reason: We Know Already***

And also, of course, when it comes to dialogue--to conversation with others--we know what we're supposed to do. To be told what we already know can feel like we're being talked down to. I don't want to be that person, you know? But, we do have to remember:

We're the ones who walk in the Spirit, who keep in step with the Spirit. We're the ones who avoid conceitedness, and don't provoke or envy each other. Our freedom from a tightly ruled life isn't a freedom to say and do whatever we want; it's to, as Paul puts it, "serve one another humbly in love." Almost everyone of Paul's letters to the first churches ended with basic stuff he'd remind his readers about, just in case they forgot. He says in Ephesians, "Don't let any

unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.” He says we have get rid of every form of malice--bitterness, rage, anger, brawling, and slander. And these things are driven by what we say and how we say it. They don’t line up with loving speech at all.

James reminds us that we have to allow God to tame our tongues. “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.” And James isn’t saying it “shouldn’t be” because it’s not nice; he’s saying it should be impossible: “Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?...a salt spring [can’t] produce fresh water.”

James is ultimately echoing Jesus, who we recall saying, “No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. A good person brings good things out of the good stored up in their heart, and an evil person brings evil things out of the evil stored up in their heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.”

We know what our hearts are supposed to be full of; we know

we're supposed to speak only things that benefit those who hear. We know we're not to provoke others.

We even, maybe, remember James when he talks about another form of speech, boasting, and reminds us, "If anyone, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them." We know how we're supposed to talk with others. Love is at its center. So when it comes to talking about dialogue, there's a part of me that thinks, simply, let's just do what we're supposed to do, speak the way we're supposed to speak. Does that really need said?

And yet, we've been tricked into the same rejection of dialogue, of conversation that risks conversion, as anyone else around us, because we're as wrapped up in identity in-grouping as anyone else.

And, yet, we also know that our in-group is supposed to exist for everyone outside it, no matter what they believe or say; we're blessed to be a blessing. And we know that we have nothing to fear from conversations with others, because God is for us, not against us. Nothing to fear.

And so, when it comes to the idea of conversations with others, even conversations that risk us being changed by them--our perspectives, our opinions, our ideas--I know that we know doing these things should be no big deal to us.

So we have options, really.

### ***Either Faithful...***

Either we engage in dialogue with others about everything that there is to talk about in the world. We do this and act faithfully, walking in the Spirit, with love in our hearts. We do it unafraid.

Or we don't do it.

### ***...or Unfaithful***

And if we don't engage in dialogue with others about those things we see, and hear, and read about, we still do some things, right? When they try to engage us?

Generally, we either stuff whatever it is we're thinking as they speak, and explode later on. We argue with them after they leave. Or we avoid them, whoever is speaking. Maybe we cleverly redirect the conversation without actually making it clear we're trying to avoid the conversation.

But we stuff, and explore, and avoid, and basically disengage with dialogue. And those responses aren't faithful ones, even if they are, occasionally, better than some alternative.

### ***How To dialogue well:***

If we do want dialogue, and are willing to risk conversion--in an opinion, perspective, belief--because we recognize that we have not only the freedom to dialogue well, but the responsibility to, then, you know, we can do some things to make those conversations go well.

### ***Affirm your identity:***

The greatest thing to keep in mind as we dialogue with others is who we are in Christ. We have to affirm our identities in Christ, to ourselves. I promised us this bit.

In an age of increased identity tribalism, which asks of us a total allegiance to whatever ideologies our in-group teaches us matter, and a commitment to prove the out-group's perspective wrong, we can easily forget that not everything is of moral significance. Everything somehow becomes a threat to our identity, and every opinion is vested with enormous moral value. But...sometimes that's just not true.

Anytime there's a spirit of collaboration, a dialogue, a conversation with the potential for conversion, it's a miracle. I think it's the virtue of God's Kingdom Come. Because we know that the basic societal distinctions--tribes, tongues, and nations--and basic natural distinctions--male and female, Jew or Greek--all break down when God's Kingdom is present. Look, we may not always interact with Christians, but we'll always be interacting with those who need to recognize the

virtue of Christ, the love of God, as it comes out of our mouths.

Here's why it's so, so important that we affirm our identity to ourselves. To affirm our identity is to no longer find disagreements with others threatening, right? To affirm our identity frees us from being afraid that if we change our minds about something, we'll lose ourselves. That fear lies at the heart of so much of our dialogue avoidance.

And the truth about us is that we are God's dearly loved Children, who bring God so much pleasure. Nothing can separate us from God's love for us in Christ, and we're privileged citizens of the Kingdom of God, made for the world's blessing, surrogates of Christ our brother.

And so, we're just free from the deep threat that dialogue has for those who are preoccupied defending their identity, and proving the out-group wrong. Our corporate identity as the Body of Christ includes a mandate that we don't have to worry about defending ourselves; God will worry about that for us.

In the end, if I have a strong sense of identity in Christ, you can believe all sorts of things different from my beliefs, and it's no threat to my sense of identity. We can talk about anything, and I have no ideology to protect, because my

identity depends on it, apart from the ideology of faith, and hope, and love, and whatever that demands of me when it comes to my interacting with you. I become resistant, inoculated against the world's fearfulness that runs from every conversation that might include conversion. I believe God is with me, and will protect me.

And in fact, to try to avoid dialogue, or lie about what we believe and explode later on is to operate out of something other than our true identity in Christ.

### ***Practice Humility:***

The greatest virtue in engaging in dialogue well is humility. The greatest virtue in engaging in good dialogue, conversations that could lead to conversion, is humility.

To be humble is to know that we don't know everything, and have not fully arrived. We value what others might teach us, and recognize that we ourselves might teach them, too, if we can have a conversation with one another.

We could all say more on this, knowing that we're meant for humility, remembering how Paul calls us to take on the humility Jesus himself showed, how James reminds us that our dependance on God is a humility that will result in our blessing.

But if our conversations with people are failing in some way, if they don't even exist, if our dialogue with people always leaves a bad taste in our mouths, I'm willing to bet it's humility that we're lacking...and of course, it's humility we need. The specific humility of confessing the lies we tell ourselves, that we have nothing to learn and nothing to offer.

### ***Ultimate Concerns:***

And look, For some people, they will never, ever risk conversion by way of conversation. Their only option is to attack, because they would rather die than lose whatever it is they have formed their identity around: National identity. Racial Identity. Sexual identity. Gender identity. Political identity. Vocational identity. Parental identity.

And Christian identity, too.

The problem is that Jesus we're not meant to try to protect God, we're not meant to be soldiers against any human power, we're meant to obey God, rather than man. Our enemies are spiritual enemies, not human ones.

We're not meant to protect our Christian identity. We're not meant to protect our Christian identity. We're meant to protect our faithfulness. And that can sound like it's splitting hairs, but the implications are very, very different. If I exist to protect my Christian identity, I can't ever have a

conversation that might lead to conversion--a change in what I believe right now about love, or life, or God. I just can't. If I exist to protect my faithfulness, then all that matters is discovering how to be more faithful, more often, in more places.

When it comes to dialogue, everyone is an opportunity, because we've got nothing to lose and the Kingdom of God to gain.

### ***Ending Dialogue:***

And let me say this. The corollary to faithfulness and a strong sense of your identity is to know when dialogue needs to end.

Not end so that violence can begin, as if every conversation is some precursor to war. We aren't allowed a "Negotiations are over! Get 'em!" attitude. When Paul says "insofar as it's up to you, live at peace with everyone," he's pointing out the simple truth that it's not always up to us to be at peace with people.

On our side, there will be times when someone doesn't want to talk anymore, doesn't want to explore whatever topic is being explored. We have to be able to let go of a conversation, without making sure we get the last word in. And I know our congregation. We are clever, smart, experts,

we are, by and large, “last word” people. We just have to be okay with giving that up.

We also have to know when we’re simply wasting our time. Whoever we’ve been talking to has pulled a fast one. They aren’t engaging in conversation with an openness to conversion; they just love to argue. Don’t play. Pick up yourself and go home. Don't pick up what they lay down. You’re time is more important to the world than to have it wasted in someone else’s game, whose only play is occupying your time.

I mean, some people like to play a game in which all they want to do is rile you up and occupy your time. I can’t give you any pointers on how to recognize this, except to say be sensitive the Holy Spirit alive in you, and engage in many dialogues until your senses develop. You’ll know. If you want, you can let the person know why you’re no longer going to engage in the conversation you’re in the middle of. Sometimes that’s called for; sometimes it’s not. When a troll shows you their bridge, don't go under it.

What we can never do is avoid dialogue because of fear of contamination. To do that is to reject the way of Jesus. We can’t fear some conversion of what we believe; every relationship, and every conversation we have with anyone, has the potential to change our perspective on the world.

**Conclusion:**

We—us, Smoky Row—need be the community that helps us dialogue well. We practice humility, remembering that we have things to learn from one another. We practice affirming our identity, knowing we have nothing to fear as we have conversations that might lead to conversions in how we think about life and love and God. We call each other out when it seems as if we're not really interested in conversation and dialogue, but really just want to stir things up.

We resist the identity tribalism of the world, and learn to recognize it and resist it together. We live with nothing to prove, nothing to fear, and God's Kingdom to gain as we reveal love by the words and sentiments we express.

This is only marginally more difficult to do during COVID than it is any other time, if we will it.

I don't know how to encourage us in this, and only pray that God would. If we who have nothing to fear from it can't engage in dialogue with others, *then no one can*. I pray the Spirit would help us all in this.