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# **We Need to Talk**



A Sermon By  
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

September 10, 2017  
Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

## We Need to Talk

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Grace Episcopal Church  
The Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost  
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*Jesus said, "If another member of the church sins against you,  
go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.  
If the member listens to you, you have regained that one."*

-- Matthew 18:15

Last Monday, my wife, Susan, and I were driving home, after a long weekend away, when she turned to me and asked, "What were your favorite things this summer?"

This is an old tradition in our family, one we've been doing ever since our boys were little. Whenever we have a vacation, or some special family time, or we come to the end of the summer, one of us will ask, "What were your favorite things?" And, the rest of us will take turns offering our answers. It's something we all love to do, even the three boys, because it reminds us of all the fun we had, and inevitably, someone will say something that gets the rest of us going, "Oh, yeah. Right. That was great. I loved that, too."

I thought about the question for a moment, and then, started rattling off my favorite summer things: sitting by the pool; playing golf; being back in New York City; a beautiful night at Nationals Park watching the Mets beat the Nats (it only happened once all season). Susan and I also spent a week in California, driving the coast and visiting San Francisco, and so, as usual, it was hard to think of all my favorite things because it was such a great summer.

But, then, Susan said, "What about Charlottesville?"

Charlottesville, Virginia, is one of our favorite places in the world. We often go there for a day or two when we want to escape the city. We love the rolling hills, the mountains, getting outside, and enjoying all of the great restaurants. We were there several times over the summer, including a Fourth of July weekend with our boys. We played golf, tennis, had a barbecue, saw the fireworks. It was everything we would want to celebrate Independence Day. It was awesome.

As we all know, though, this summer, Charlottesville was also the site of white supremacist, neo-Nazi rally. Hatred, bigotry and prejudice were literally walking in the streets. Protesters and counter-protesters clashed. A young man from Ohio drove his car into a crowd, injuring nineteen people and killing a woman named Heather Heyer (higher), and, when it was all over, people on both sides were pointing fingers, blaming people on the other side for the violence, while some of our political leaders equivocated. It was awful.

So, I didn't know what Susan was asking. Did she want to talk about the good things that happened in Charlottesville, or the bad things that happened? Or, did she want to talk about both? It was one of those moments where neither of us knew what to say, something that doesn't happen very often. Most of the time we can't stop talking, we can't stop sharing, but not at this moment. Rather than saying anything, rather than talking about what we were thinking or what we were feeling, we just kept going, we just kept driving, without saying another word.

We all experience moments like that, moments when we hold back, not sharing our thoughts, not sharing our feelings. It happens for all sorts of reasons: we might be afraid to share because opening up makes us vulnerable to judgment, criticism, and rejection; or, maybe, talking about our emotions doesn't come naturally – in some families, it's just not done, and so, maybe we never learned how to do it

The most common reason we all hold back is to avoid tension, and conflict. We may be willing to talk about our favorite things; but, we don't want to talk about our least favorite things, those things that left us disappointed, upset, or hurt; and, we don't want to make others feel that way, either. We don't want to hurt other people's feelings. We don't want to make others mad. We don't want to get into an argument.

Last weekend, the hotel where Susan and I stayed seemed to be full of lots of young couples, and, one night after dinner, we were walking through the lobby, on the way back to our room, when we noticed a man and woman having a very heated conversation. Unfortunately, there was no way for us to avoid them. We had to walk right past them to get to the elevator, and, as we did, all we heard was the woman say, "First of all, I love your parents..." And, we knew that conversation wasn't going any place good.

Nobody likes to have conversations like that, with a spouse, with a coworker, with a friend here at church, so we do everything we can to avoid those conversations, but then, all that happens is we process our feelings in different ways: we give the other person the silent treatment; we talk about them behind their back; we "un-friend" them on Facebook; we avoid them altogether. Rather than saying anything, rather than talking with the other person about what we're thinking or what we're feeling, we just keep going, we just keep driving, without ever saying another word.

In today's Gospel reading, though, Jesus reminds us there's another way to handle these situations: "If another member of the church sins against you," Jesus says, "go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses."

This passage comes from one of the five major discourses in the Gospel of Matthew, in which Jesus teaches his disciples about their identity and way of life. Each of the discourses has a different theme, and, as you may be able to tell, this particular discourse focuses on people, relationships, and how we should treat one another.

Jesus knew disagreements and conflict were bound to happen because we're all human and it's part of living together, but Jesus also offered a Christian way to address friction and discord, which includes talking to one another and listening to one another, with compassion, and openness, and sensitivity. If we're bothered or upset, if we've been hurt or let down, we should speak up and let the other person know. Yes, the conversation might be awkward and uncomfortable, but it could also be an opportunity for us to experience grace, and forgiveness, and healing. Jesus often had difficult conversations with people: with the disciples, with the Pharisees and scribes, with Pontius Pilate. Jesus questioned them; Jesus challenged them; and yet, at the same time, Jesus loved them. Jesus loved all of them, seeing them as children of God, made in God's image.

And, Jesus was not the only biblical character to have tense, stress-filled interactions with other people. We read of difficult conversations throughout the Bible. There was Moses confronting Pharaoh. The Old Testament prophets rebuking the people of Israel. Saint Paul writing some pretty harsh words to the communities he founded. Sometimes, God calls us to be courageous and have a difficult conversation.

If any good came out of the events in Charlottesville, it was people were talking, about prejudice and hate, race and injustice, the legacy of slavery and the Civil War. But, as the news cycle changes, and other issues make the headlines, that conversation will die down.

We need to be courageous and keep the conversation going. Because Grace Church is a thriving, cohesive and racially diverse congregation, with a passion for justice and equality, we are uniquely positioned to be a unifying voice for racial justice. If we cannot discuss issues of race in this community, where we so greatly cherish our diversity, then there is little hope of having a wider conversation out there in the world.

Under the current Presiding Bishop, the Episcopal Church has made a commitment to racial justice and reconciliation. It is now one of the Church's of top priorities, and we are proud to join in these efforts.

Our theme for this program year is Racial Justice: Finding Redemption through Truth-Telling, and we invite everyone in the community to engage with one another to raise our shared consciousness and build community through truth-telling about racial justice. Together, we will learn how race has affected the history of Grace Church and Silver Spring and how race continues to affect our own lives. We will hear from parishioners and outside experts, and we'll have intergenerational programs to help educate our children and youth.

All of this will be done the Grace Church way, with compassion, and openness, and sensitivity, following the way of Jesus, and so, I hope you will join us, because we need to talk about it.

Amen.