

A Crucial Conversation

Matthew 16:21-28

A couple of weeks ago, at a conference I attended, one of the speakers was Joseph Grenny. Grenny is a New York Times Bestselling author and is in great demand as a speaker. His fame is due to his research and writing on what he calls “crucial conversations.”

I. What makes a conversation “crucial”? Three things:

First, opinions vary. The people in the conversation do not agree on things. Second, stakes are high. You may differ with someone as to whether the best Chick-fil-a milkshake is the peach or the cookies and cream. Even though your opinions vary, that doesn’t rise to the level of a crucial conversation. But if you disagree with your boss on whether or not you deserve a promotion, that may very well set up a crucial conversation because a lot is at stake. Third, emotions run strong. You could be talking with your son or daughter about the phone call you received telling you that he or she has been skipping school for the last week. Your heart begins to pound and your cheeks flush. A crucial conversation is at hand!

What makes these conversations crucial is that the outcome could have a huge impact on the quality and direction of your life. But, Grenny says, “despite the importance of crucial conversations, we often back away from them because we fear we’ll make matters worse. We’ve become masters at avoiding the tough conversations.”¹

I thought of that as I worked with this passage this week. There is no question that we are dealing here with a crucial conversation. Did opinions vary? Oh yes. Matthew tells us that Jesus had begun explaining to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter – the same Peter who had just a few verses earlier responded to Jesus by saying that He was “the Messiah, the Son of

the living God,” took Jesus aside and said, “Never, Lord! This will never happen to you!” Clearly, they were not on the same page at that moment.

Were the stakes high? Did this conversation matter? Would the outcome have an impact on the quality and direction of Jesus’ life and the lives of His followers? Absolutely!

And as for emotions running strong, I think you’ll agree that Jesus’ response qualifies. “Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me.” Ouch!

But the thing about crucial conversations is that, while they are uncomfortable and stressful, they don’t have to be destructive. If they are handled correctly, they can result in a deeper understanding and a better framework for living our lives.

That was the result of this conversation for Peter and the other disciples – and it can be the outcome for us. We may be able to see ourselves as casual observers of this conversation until we get to verse 24 where Jesus says, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Our initial reaction is that we don’t want to take up the cross. In other words, we have a different opinion. And yet, we sense that the stakes are high in our response to Jesus’ command. That creates a lot of conflicting emotion in us. In other words, suddenly we are part of this crucial conversation.

II. The strong emotion that is apparent in Jesus’ response to Peter reflects the difficult choice that He was facing. The specific words – “Get behind me Satan” – suggest that, in Peter’s words, Jesus heard an echo of the temptation he had endured in the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry. You may remember that there were three temptations. The first, to turn stones into bread. The second, to jump off of the highest point of the temple in order to prompt an angelic rescue – and third, to gain control over all of the kingdoms of the world by bowing down and worshipping the devil. All of these were things that Jesus already had the power to do or that the Father intended to give to Him. If he could multiply five loaves and two fish into a banquet for five thousand

¹ Kerry Patterson, Joseph Grenny, Ron McMillan and Al Switzer, *Crucial Conversations*, pp. 1-3.

men plus the women and children that were with them, then certainly He could turn stones into bread. At the end of the temptations, Matthew tells us that the angels came and attended to Jesus. Certainly, they were prepared to do whatever Jesus asked them to do. And as for the kingdoms of the world, part of God's plan was that, one day, "every knee would bow . . . and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Philippians 2:10-11). In other words, the *result* of the temptations was not the issue. The problem was with the method by which Satan suggested Jesus secure those things. Satan was offering Jesus a path that avoided suffering. He was tempting Him to bypass the cross. He was suggesting that Jesus take matters into His own hands rather than trust His Heavenly Father.

Now, it's true that Peter's motive was completely different than Satan's had been. Peter's purpose in taking Jesus aside may have had multiple layers to it. But certainly, part of his motivation was his *love* for Jesus. Still, the outcome if Jesus heeded Peter's objection would have been that He would have rejected the way of the cross. It was a path that, from a purely human perspective, Jesus would gladly have avoided. Right up to the end of His life, Jesus was still asking that, if possible, God would remove the "cup of suffering" from Him.

But, at the same time, Jesus knew that the only way to realize the purpose for which He had come into the world was to submit to the way God had for Him. The choice was between embracing the concerns of God on the one hand – or embracing human concerns on the other. Jesus' entire life can be defined by His decision to give absolute priority to the concerns of God. In his letter to the Philippians, the apostle Paul describes Jesus' mindset this way – "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage, rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!" (Phil. 2:6-8).

III. The crucial part of this conversation is that Jesus tells us that, if we want to be His followers, we have to make a similar choice. He says that we have to "take up our cross and follow him" (Matt. 16:24). It was a "gut check" moment for the disciples – and it is a "gut check" moment for us.

We may respond by saying, "Why would we want to do that?" Clearly there are easier ways to live our lives. But Jesus goes on to tell us that, while that is true, his followers must have their eyes set on the bigger picture. They must be focused on the ultimate outcome. And there are two ways to approach this.

On the one hand, we can choose to save our lives. This is our natural human tendency. We are inclined to do everything we can to preserve life. We do everything to make our lives comfortable. We explore all kinds of strategies for extending our lives as long as they can possibly be extended. We make "saving" our lives our highest priority. We invest everything we have and everything we are into making sure we have a life that the world around us will consider successful. And we certainly try to make sure that we will avoid any kind of suffering. But Jesus says that, when we do that, the result is that we will lose our lives.

Why would He say that? Is He saying that we should go looking for trouble? No, that's not what He's saying. He's saying that if we make it our highest priority to preserve our lives, we will lose them because we *are* going to lose our lives eventually.

But what is the alternative? Jesus says that we can choose instead to lose our lives for Him. In other words, we can decide that we are going to live for something bigger than ourselves and our own survival and comfort. We can choose to get caught up in the things that He gave Himself to and that He died for. We can decide that instead of simply preserving our own lives, we are going to make it our priority to love God and to love others and to show the people around us what the love of Jesus looks like. When we do that, Jesus says that – against all reasonable expectation – we will find our lives.

Notice that Jesus doesn't say, "Whoever wants to save their life will lose it but whoever loses their life for me will *save* it." He says, "Whoever loses their life for me will *find* it." I went back to the original language to make sure that wasn't just a translation issue and it's not. The word there means to find something for yourself or to obtain something you didn't have before.

You see, Jesus isn't saying, "If you want to save your life, you will lose it – but if you lose your life for me, you'll get back the life of comfort and success that you were pursuing before." He's saying, "That life is an illusion. It has always been an illusion and it always will be. But if you'll "lose" your life for me, you'll discover – you will "*find*"-- life that you never knew was possible." It's a life that isn't based on preservation. It is a life based on "yielding" ourselves to Him. Out of that yielding, we find meaning and purpose that we never thought possible.

That's true even though it will mean submitting to the way of the cross. Whatever "taking up our cross" may mean, it certainly implies that it will involve suffering. Again, Jesus isn't saying that we are to go looking for trouble – that we're to intentionally make things difficult for ourselves. He's talking about what we are going to do with the suffering that is an inevitable part of life and that will inevitably be an outcome of our commitment to serve Him.

For Jesus, the question was not whether or not life would bring suffering. The question was whether He would run from it or whether He would yield to the will and purpose of God in the middle of it. He's saying that the same is true for us. Following Him will involve a choice not to run from the challenges and difficulties that a life committed to Him will bring but instead to yield to Him in the middle of those things. When we do that, the surprise is that we *find* the life that we long for at the center of our being. To use the word that Jesus uses here, we find our *soul*.

One way we might interpret this crucial conversation between Jesus and Peter is like this – Jesus starts talking about suffering and dying on the cross and Peter says, "Never Lord! This shall never happen to you!" Jesus responds,

"Oh yes it will happen to me, Peter, and not only will it happen to me, if you choose to follow me, it's going to happen to you too! And Peter, it is by yielding to the cross that you will find life. It's by yielding to the cross that you will become "the rock."

When, in the previous verses, Jesus changed Simon's name to Peter, He wasn't saying that he already embodied that name. Far from it. When Jesus went to the cross, Peter's inclination was not to follow Jesus and take up his own cross but to run as fast as he could in the opposite direction. It was only over the many years that followed that Peter became a rock on which Jesus could build His church. Peter learned how to follow Jesus – and that process included difficulty and challenge and, yes, suffering. The result of that process was that Peter found the life that Jesus intended for him when He called him from his fishing nets.

The message Jesus has for us here is that, if we are to become the people He intended us to become when He called us, suffering will have a role to play. That suffering will take different forms for each of us. I see the different forms it is taking in our congregation. The most obvious have to do with our physical conditions – diseases and injuries and physical pain. But there are others who are going through financial suffering – still others through suffering in their relationships. I know some who are facing all of these at the same time!

I want to be careful here. I'm not suggesting that your suffering or my suffering are good in themselves any more than I'm saying that the cross in itself was anything other than a terrible instrument of torture. In the middle of it, it can seem that we are going through hell. But I am saying that it is in the middle of those things that we have the opportunity to find life that is bigger than our problems. It is in the face of the cross that we have an opportunity to grow and mature in ways that we would never experience otherwise.

The irony is that it was through the cross that the glory of God was revealed. And the paradox in our lives is that our suffering is the arena in which

God is able to reveal Himself to us and then through us to make Himself known to the world around us.

I'm not thrilled to have ALS. I've had a few well-meaning folks – not people in our church – who have said to me, “You know, what you really need to do is pray for healing.” I know they say it out of love and concern but I want to say, “Do you think I haven't been doing that?!” Of course, I'd prefer a different environment in which to follow Jesus. But, apparently, this is the one that I'm being given. I'll keep praying for healing and I appreciate your prayers as well. But as things now stand, the question is, “What does it look like to follow Jesus here?”

And the surprising thing is that I am finding and experiencing things that I never would have discovered had it not been for this. My relationship with God and my relationship with the people around me have deepened. I don't have to work as hard at having the “crucial conversations” because some of the barriers that were there when it looked like I “had it all together” – whatever that means – aren't there any more. I'm pretty much doing the things I've always done – but doing them against the backdrop of ALS has changed a lot of things – changed them for the better. I wouldn't trade that part of my life.

I had a crucial conversation earlier this week . . .

I. What Makes a Conversation Crucial?

- A. _____ vary
- B. _____ are high
- C. _____ run strong

II. The Choice That Jesus Faced

- A. Embracing the concerns of _____
- B. Embracing _____ concerns

III. The Choice That We Must Make

- A. We can choose to _____ our lives

-- The result is that we will _____ them

B. We can choose to _____ our lives

-- The result is that we will _____ them