

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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John & Laura Crosby
We Have to Talk: So We Really Hear Each Other 1 John 4:18
1 John 4:18

Sermon starts with a video - We Have to Talk: Baggage Check

<https://vimeo.com/161476710>

We talked last week at Easter about how it's important to understand whether the resurrection really happened. But what's even more important is to ask: if the risen Christ is alive, what difference does it make in your life or is it just something you believe? We said that the most important thing Jesus teaches us is that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and we are to love other people as ourselves. Very simple, yet incredibly hard. So, what we would like to do the next several weeks is to talk about how can we love each other better. How do we develop better relational skills?

Laura speaking

So, I just want to start by saying that when John asked me if I wanted to do this with him I said, "What could be more fun than baring our luggage in front of a couple thousand of our closest friends?" So, A: I hope you feel our pain and B: We're not alone in this. Like John said, you're coming into this with us, too.

I want to start by talking about the ways relationships have changed over the last 10 or 15 years. One of the things that has changed our relationships is technology, whether we engage in it a lot or a little. John is not a techy guy; I can barely get him to answer his phone or answer text messages. I do a lot more on social media—Facebook and Instagram and all that stuff. But, whether we are engaged in it or not, it has affected our relationships. The term "friend" has been evolving so that today it doesn't necessarily mean someone you are doing life with in person. They did a study that showed the average Facebook user has 328 "friends", but the average American has two close friends and 25% of us would say we have zero close friends. There's a lot of activity online, but not a lot of intimacy. Sociologists call this deferred loneliness; we are living for likes, but we are longing for love. We may feel a little bit bored, a little lonely, so we go on Facebook and have this kind of virtual relationship without any strings attached. We long to connect in relationship, whether that is through friendships, or small groups, or spouse, or job relationships, we long for that, but it's not easy because, like the video showed, we all bring baggage into those relationships.

I got an email a couple of weeks ago asking me for some advice, and the person wrote

this, she said (and it's not from this church) . . . she said, "How do I deal with a woman at church who is controlling, officious, patronizing, dominating, and overbearing? Other than that she's just great." It really made me think about this before I answered her. What about those times when we see those tendencies, either in someone else or in ourselves? I think we need to stop and ask *where is this controlling attitude or whatever coming from?* Is there baggage that this person is bringing into this relationship, or if it's me, what am I afraid of? I think fear is often an underlying emotion beneath the baggage that we bring. I think our baggage can come from two different sources. The first one is the environments that we're in: the job, school, home. And some of those environments are ones we choose and some of them are ones we don't choose. Some of them are healthy and some of them are not. The second source is that we bring baggage from events in our past and that's the one we most likely think of—a wife left us, or our mother died, or we've experienced abuse or addiction. And what can make the baggage heavy sometimes, especially heavy, is that there may be lies associated with the event that has been in our past.

John speaking

So, baggage can be both bad and good. We get good things that help us out of our past, but sometimes we also get lies that are hard for us to see. One of the things I'm going to say over and over is this: it is easier to see the baggage of others than to see our own. Now, I could tell you things about Rich Phenow back there that would curl your hair! It would explain why he has hair and I don't, but Rich can bury me even deeper because over the decades we have come to know each other's stories.

In another church, I saw an incredibly talented, gifted woman associate. Terrific gifts, loved by a lot of people, and then it all went wrong. There was a divorce, there were fights, and there was conflict between the staff about how it should be handled. The elders got scared and frankly, just about put her out of the church, and she had to leave that community. Then at the next church she went to and the church after that, the people noticed how guarded she was; she was no longer the life of the party. More than that, she was always careful; afraid to offend. And you cannot be a pastor if you are afraid to offend. You will never ask the question, you will never go deeper, and she found that this conflict had made her fear-filled, and so she stayed up here on the service, pleasant but not engaging.

Laura speaking

Now I don't think there's probably any doubt in this room that John and I both bring baggage into our relationship, but for me, I grew up in a household where I was very spoiled and I really kind of liked that. It was pretty good for me, but I brought with me into our relationship the lie that if I didn't look at my bank account there would always be money there. Not a great thing in a marriage, right?

John speaking

Well, I came from a very different background. My parents had a lot of money, and when I needed it the most, they lost it all. So, I came into this relationship determined not to make those same mistakes. And so when we would talk about buying something, I would try to be very reasonable and logical on the surface, but underneath I'm going, *oh please not again, not again* and it meant there were two conversations going on because of my baggage.

Laura speaking

I on the other hand, I come from a great family where there was very little conflict, and because of that, we didn't really know how to handle conflict when it came. I came into our marriage really thinking that silence meant disapproval. Well, John is an introvert and he really likes silence, and it's not necessarily disapproval.

John speaking

I thought, *I love this! I can be quiet and she just loves it!* But she kept going, "What's wrong? What's wrong? What's wrong?" I kept thinking *this is great!* Different baggage. For me, I grew up in a pretty dysfunctional home. Oh, so did you—let's face it! The number of dysfunctional families in America, Rich says, is about equal to the number of families in America. We all have our stuff. In my particular family there was lots of yelling, lots of anger, lots of sarcasm and to this day, I hate sarcasm. I won't use it, I don't like when it comes to me. When it's on the TV, I switch channels; it's painful. When arguments come, my voice tends to go down rather than go up because I hate the images of yelling and what it does when you lose control. I guess I hadn't realized how strong that was until we had teenage girls. I'm having a talk with one of our teenage girls and the talk turns into a discussion, turns into a conflict, turns into an argument, turns into war, and the more we talk at the door—I can remember we're at the door of her bedroom on the second floor—she is getting red in the face and angry and holding back tears, and I'm being patient, and logical, and wise, and kind. All of a sudden she turns to me and says, "You have no idea what I have to go through in this family." I burst into tears. I started crying and I looked at her and I didn't trust myself to talk. Meanwhile Laura has come up to listen to what's going on. She sees me start to cry and I looked at her and walked away. I went down to the basement. My leaving that argument scared Maggie—oops, scared our daughter—it scared Maggie more than my yelling at her, because all of a sudden some of my baggage had come to the surface and she turns to Laura and says, "What happened? I'm scared. What happened to dad?"

Laura speaking

So, we all bring luggage obviously. We all try to manage our luggage in different ways. I really like these four ways that Andy Stanley has suggested. One thing we often do is we try to minimize it. It's like, *Baggage? What baggage? I don't have any baggage. You*

have baggage, but I don't have any baggage. No, no. We try to minimize it. Second, we may try to medicate it. We want to numb ourselves to the pain of our baggage—so whether it's alcohol or drugs—we try to medicate it. Third, we may try to muscle it through. It's just like we're going to steam roller over everyone in our path. I can handle this; I'm in control regardless of my baggage. We're going forward. And then the fourth way is we maximize our baggage in an unhealthy way. It's like, okay look at my baggage, poor me, I can't help what I do. I'm a victim of my past experience and all this baggage, and we use our past as an excuse to blame.

John speaking

We want to make sure you hear that we don't think everything that causes problems in relationships is because of our past or our baggage. All of us have different personalities, different gifts, strengths, sins, weaknesses, dreams, styles...and there's a lot of good baggage, too. But today we want to look at our relationships and see if we can unload or at least identify some of that baggage from the past in healthier ways.

First, we believe that you need to unpack that baggage with Jesus, and then we believe you need to unpack your past with other people. What do I mean by unpack your baggage with Jesus? Last week, on Easter, we talked about the difference between believing in the resurrection and letting Jesus come to you. I believe that the resurrection shows you what God thinks of you. Jesus is crazy about you. He loves you. There is nothing you have done, nothing you are doing, nothing you will do that will take His arms away from you. He loves you perfectly. And you know what one of the results of being loved perfectly is? The apostle John says, "Perfect love casts out fear." When I am loved just as I am, for whom I am, unconditionally, I don't have to be afraid. Love casts out fear. Ann Voskamp says, "Perfect love says when you mess up, He'll pick you up. When you can't carry on, He'll carry you. This was at the core of Jesus's ministry." At the very beginning, in Luke 4 Jesus says, "God sent me to announce pardon for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind. To set the burdened and the battered free." I love that. Let God set you free. Again, from John, "Know the truth and the truth will set you free" because you don't have to pretend anymore. If God, through the death of Jesus on the cross, has paid in full the penalty of my sins, and my brokenness, and my baggage, and nailed it to the cross and settled it, then there's no reason for us to keep carrying it around. We need to let it go. God wants you to let it go.

Gordon and Gail McDonald are mentors of Laura and me and they wrote once about a long trip they took. They were exhausted when they reached their hotel. As they were taking their suitcases and the day bags out of the car to go into the hotel, the bellhop comes running up and says, "Oh let me get that for you, please." Gordon reaches into his pocket and realizes he doesn't have any cash. No cash. He says, "No thanks, we got it. We got it" because he can't tip the kid. "No, no we got it." So, they pick up their bags; schlep them all the way to the door. The doorman says, "Oh please, let me get that for you. Come on. I'm glad to help" and Gordon says, a little snippier, "No thanks, we got it" because he's embarrassed. And they get to the front desk and the woman checks him in and rings the bell and says, "Let the bellhop take these up to your room in

just a second” and Gordon’s like, “No thanks, we got it” and he starts to turn away when the woman says, “You do realize that the gratuities are all included in your bill. They’ve all been paid for.” Gordon stands up straight and goes, “You mean I carried these bags when somebody has already paid for it?” He says, “Carrying bags when somebody is there and paid to carry them for me is almost as incomprehensible as carrying baggage from my past when somebody has already paid to lift it off of me.” That’s exactly what happened at the cross. That hymn we sing says it so well, *Jesus Paid It All*. But I have to consciously recognize my bags and ask Jesus to carry them. And sometimes I have to ask Jesus again, and again, and again to carry them because those suckers keep jumping on my back.

Laura speaking

So, first we unpack with Jesus and with perfect love. His love casts out all fear, but Scripture also encourages us to unpack our baggage with others around us in the body of Christ. Years ago we were crossing the border between Israel and Egypt—a little bit of a tense border crossing, right? So, I put my bag on the belt and it went through the x-ray thing and we were standing there watching when the security guard started motioning to call another security guard over. They’re talking more animatedly and then they call me over. They say, “Is this your bag?” And I said, “Yes” and then they point to the x-ray screen and they say, “What is that?” and I said, “Wow, it looks like a gun to me.” John said it was not my finest moment, but I share that to say we need to look for the harmful stuff in our luggage and take the gun out—and it was not a gun in my bag—but we need to look for the harmful stuff.

So, now I want to invite you into the fun of this and I’m going to encourage you to do a little TSA search in your pew to think about what luggage you may have dragged into your pew this morning. Think back over the major events in your life and probably there will be some things that stand out that are particularly hurtful or formative for you, not your fault, your fault, whatever. Think of the major events: divorce, loss of job, illness, rejection, addiction, anything...what are the first things that come to mind? And then ask yourself: how do these things that have come to mind potentially create baggage that I may be taking into relationships? Whether those are into relationships with friends, or family, or co-workers. And, if you have trouble thinking of what baggage might be there, think of the times when emotion kind of wells up in you. You know, when all of a sudden you’re a little bit afraid, a little bit defensive, those are usually signs that you need to pay attention to what baggage might be there.

John speaking

And if you still don’t get it, ask somebody who knows you. I’m not saying turn to the person next to you, I’m saying, ask somebody who knows you because they may not know the baggage, but they know the symptoms. The Scriptures say we’re in this together. God has given us to each other. The Book of Hebrews is written to a group of people and in Hebrews 12 it says,

¹Let us throw off everything that hinders us and the sin that so easily entangles us.

James writes to another community and says,

¹⁶Therefore, confess your sins

Claim your bags to each other

and pray for each other so that you may be healed. [James 5:16]

Not so you may feel guilty.

The Book of Galatians that Laura talked about in the Kid's Sermon says,

²Carry one another's burdens...

Carry each other's bags.

And unpack those bags. How does that help... bringing things into the light with somebody safe? It defuses our fear, remember? Love casts out fear and allows us to be who we really are; it allows us to begin healing to become who God wants us to become. Andy Stanley says, "When I identify the source, I can change the course." I love that image.

Laura speaking

So, one of the suitcases I carry around with me is heavy with a wound of rejection. The wound has healed, but there's a scar there and John and I both realize it has an impact on our relationship and we need to be aware of that. For me, I can be overly sensitive in certain situations and I need to be aware of that. When that happens, when that emotion comes up in me, I need to say *wait a minute, what's going on here? Where is this coming from?* And most importantly, what does God have to say to me in this? What's the truth here? And John, for his part in these situations, needs to offer a little bit more grace and a little bit more patience when he is aware of these moments. Sharing our baggage with each other like this can be really scary; it feels very vulnerable when we are honest with each other.

I was traveling another time by myself and there was a guy in front of me going through TSA and for some reason they made him open his suitcase. He opened his suitcase and the whole top layer of it was filled with porno magazines. Now, all the people around him saw that and were embarrassed for him and turned away, but this is how it can feel when we open up honestly to other people, when we reveal the hard stuff in our luggage. It makes us vulnerable. But, but, when we receive someone else's baggage with grace and love, we create space and a place that helps them heal and grow.

Might I suggest three spiritual disciplines that might help in this process of entering into

unpacking our baggage together? The first one is just to listen; the discipline of listening deeply. When we say that, we don't mean listening to fix or listening to advise, but rather listening to enter in, listening to really try to deeply understand the reality of the other person and their feelings, and to empathize with them. The second spiritual discipline we've talked about a little bit is very difficult, but it's confession. So as I am doing my soul work with God, I may come to recognize how the baggage of my past is affecting my relationships—say with John—I can come to him and say *you know what? I realize that I'm not responding well when this type of thing comes up. I need to ask your forgiveness and I'd really appreciate your help in this.* So, confession can be a discipline that helps us, a practice that helps us. And then the last one is a discipline or a practice that we can help others in: it's questioning for better understanding. So, if we're in a relationship and we see the same situation come up over and over again and the same kind of emotions come up, we might gently say to the person, *you know, it seems like this is really upsetting to you. It seems like there's a lot of anger there, can you help me better understand where that might be coming from?* In an environment of care and love, that might say to them that it's safe to look and see what baggage might be there.

John speaking

That safety is a crucial part of this conversation. This may not have felt like a very spiritual sermon to many of you, but our sense is that if we receive the love of God, we're supposed to live that, and I am bad at both parts of that. If we are to try to unpack our baggage so that we don't have to drag it through our relationships, a lot of it is timing. I encourage you to do this, but I also want to make sure that you don't, on Tuesday afternoon, start to have a fight with somebody and say *Oh, the pastor said we should unpack your bags. Let's unpack your bags and throw the shoes at each other.* That's not it. It's not only finding a safe person, but a safe time. And those safe times, I think, are often when things are going well enough that we can listen, and learn, and laugh with each other and take small steps. Or maybe they come when you realize you're stuck. *Why do we keep having this fight? Why do we keep leaving feeling like this is not the way it's supposed to be?* Two or three times in the course of what I would consider the greatest gift that God has ever given me in our marriage, two or three times, Laura and I have gone to a Godly, wise, gifted, professional counselor and said *we're stuck* and that person has been a safe place to listen objectively and without blaming to say *have you considered that?* And God has used that to bring healing to us. It is perfect that we're doing this on a Communion Sunday, because too often the church gives the signal *hey get your act together and come back here, come to Communion, this is for the saints.* Ain't no truth there. This is a place where broken people bring their baggage. And they bring their baggage to the cross and they bring their baggage to the table. And they hear Jesus say, "Come to Me all of you who are burdened with baggage. Come to Me all of you who are weary. And this is how much I love you. My body is broken to give you life."

Laura speaking

Will you pray with me? Lord, we thank You that You say to us, "Come as you are. Come all of you who are weary and heavily burdened with lots of baggage." Lord, we do come to You. We come to Your table with all of our sin, our worries, our brokenness. Thank You that none of our baggage surprises You. Thank You that You carried our sin on Yourself on the cross. We ask You to forgive us and redeem us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.