

Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
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John Crosby & Todd Mulliken
We Have to Talk: About Reality in the Land of Minnesota Nice
Galatians 6:1-5

Sermon starts with a video.
We Have to Talk: Minnesota Nice
<https://vimeo.com/164262018>

So, you probably can't wait to talk to people out in the lobby, huh? Talking about things that really matter is hard. It's hard in the best of times and talking about hard things often doesn't happen in the best of times. Right from the start the reality is that churches and church people are no better at talking about hard things than our society is at large. It's hard to speak truth when it's difficult. We either burn down the house, we yell and scream and then stomp out, or we run away. We either go silent or we start talking Minnesotan like we just saw up on the screen...where, when I ask someone how you're doing, their response underneath the surface is *well, if you don't know, I'm not going to tell you*. You know? And the conversation is difficult from the beginning. But if you don't talk . . . This means something to me, this part of healthy relationships.

Long ago in a galaxy far away, I was a very young pastor. We hired a new pastor for our staff and they came on and things were fun for the first couple of days and weeks. But inside of a month, it was fairly clear to me that this person was having a hard time connecting and fitting in, and I had learned Minnesotan by then. I said, "You know, it seems like people really respond better when you do this as opposed to when you do that" and they didn't understand that I was talking about them. And the behavior goes on and the things continue, so I say, "You know, it's really important that we all agree that we'll do THAT, right?" And the person goes, "Absolutely right" and still doesn't have a clue that I'm talking about them. So, some months go by and the next conversation is, "You know, friend, I just don't think this is working. I don't think you fit in here." I did not—no credit involved—but I did not say, "I think Jesus is calling you someplace else." It was already a very painful process and I messed that up because six months ahead and four months ahead and even two months ahead, I wasn't saying straight out, "We need to talk about this!" And by the time I got to it, it was too late. It was already over the cliff, so this is not theoretical for me.

I want you to take some notes, because I bet you need this, too. I know that because right from the beginning people from within the church have struggled with this. The very first followers of Jesus in Asia were in a little town called Galatia. They met there, and their group was quickly being torn apart into factions that didn't talk to each other. They just yelled at each other and as a result, people were leaving the church. As another result, people that were watching these new Christians said, "How can their

God love them? They can't even love each other." So the apostle Paul steps in and speaks truth to the church, and he does it in a way that draws people together—even though it's hard stuff—instead of destroying relationships. So I want to share with you a couple of lessons he taught me that I wish I had known before I hired that pastor. It's at the end of the fifth chapter of Galatians. Now remember, when you read a letter in the Bible—Galatians is the letter that the apostle Paul writes—when you read a letter, your imagination needs to say *what's the question that he's answering? What's the situation he's heard about that he's responding to?* So you get to the end of Galatians chapter 5 and the apostle Paul writes:

²⁶Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.
[Galatians 5:26]

And it's obvious that he's saying *let's not become conceited* because they have already become conceited, and contentious, and envious of each other. This is a reference to the idea that there are false teachers inside the church and a bunch of people who have said, *in order to be a real follower of Jesus, you also have to follow Moses first. You're second class Christians.* "Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other." Sometimes the problem is already there. Then Paul goes on and he says, *Brothers and sisters, don't forget who you're dealing with. Whoever they are, this is a child of God.*

Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin

Again read between the lines—someone has been busted; they have been caught in a sin. Paul has spent three chapters of this letter saying, *don't do this, do that! If anybody won't change, throw them out!* He's been very clear that where sin happens, it needs to be called out, but in the same way when he says, *brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin...* isn't that everybody? Isn't that you? It might not be your turn right now, but it will be next...every one of us. And that's why he says, *it's not so important to say what happened as it is to say what's next.*

Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the spirit

you claim that you're so spiritual

you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted, too. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. [Galatians 6:1-2]

These Galatian Christians are saying fulfill the Law of Moses, then fulfill the Law of Christ. Paul is saying *no, no, no. The law of Jesus is humility and not following the rules. It's drawing people in and not pushing people away; it's rescuing people instead of judging them.* And he has a very, very hard conversation with these fellow believers in Jesus. We're not positive; we think it works. We're not positive, but we think this works. Nobody likes hard conversations. I don't even like to listen to somebody else's hard

conversations, but hard conversations are essential to healthy relationships and we all need help. We all need help. That's why I'm asking you to please write down some notes, whether it's to hand to somebody else or to pull out for yourself later. We all need help and so I have asked for help. I have a friend here, Todd Mulliken. Todd is a counselor, and an author, and a speaker, and for over 20 years, Todd has been one of the counselors that I call often for advice about, *okay, what do I tell her now?* His advice in relationships has been terrific. I thought in the land of "Minnesota nice", if you and I are trying to figure out some of the most important things when learning how to speak the truth in love, I'd ask Todd to help. So let's start with this. Why is it so hard? Why is it so hard for people to be able to speak the truth in love?

Todd speaking

Well, one of the things that is important to remember is that when we're going to have a tough conversation, it's usually pretty stressful. And when you and I undergo stress, we do have a little bit of that fight or flight mechanism in us, and we have some adrenaline flowing. And as you and Laura talked about in your sermon a few weeks ago, we are bringing stuff from our past into those delicate conversations, because the majority of the delicate conversations we've had in the past are difficult, so we either have at best maybe it went reasonably, but at worst it can be fairly traumatic. In those moments, it's really tough and I think because of that we tend to default into more of a truth-teller style or a people-pleaser style. Now, sometimes we're a little bit of both, but more often than not we have more one than the other. Kind of like what you were mentioning earlier with either the burn the house down or avoid the conversation.

John speaking

Gotcha. So, there are truth-tellers and there are people-pleasers, and it's not like there's good or bad, although if they're not like me that's bad. I feel like I'm a people-pleaser who likes to win, so it's a little tough to do everything, but you told me the other day that each type—and you all tend to run to one type or the other—each type has their strengths. The truth-tellers have strengths that they have to utilize and weaknesses that they have to manage and the same thing is true for people-pleasers.

Now what we'd like for you to do in this exercise is for you to turn to the person next to you and tell them whether they are a pleaser or truth-teller. Please don't do that! Please don't do that! Tell us, how do these different types of folks use those strengths and manage those weaknesses?

Todd speaking

So, I think the greatest news for the truth-teller is they don't mind having a difficult conversation. In fact, if there hasn't been one for five minutes, they'll create one. They don't mind conflicts. They are comfortable in them at some level, and I think that is so important that people are wired like that—to make the tough call in a family situation, to

make a tough call in business, to make a tough call with a spouse or partner—so the best thing I think they bring is being okay with having a disagreement. And then of course, I think their struggle is typically like you mentioned earlier, it is this need to be right, this need to win, the need to get the last word in, because more often than not, they grew up in situations where they perhaps never won a fight in their home growing up and soon now they're going to win, or they had a long-term marriage or difficult friendship where they were kind of bullied a bit, so now they're going to win. Sometimes they're compensating for deeper issues going on, so that's a weakness they have to manage a little bit so they realize the goal isn't having a need to win, but rather just a need to understand.

John speaking

And how about on the people-pleaser side?

Todd speaking

So we learn in John 1 that Jesus came full of truth and grace. In my experience, the truth-tellers are really good with truth but not so good with grace. But, the pleasers are typically really good with grace. James talks about being quick to listen. It seems to me that pleaser types will not mind listening, and engaging, and wanting harmony, and wanting to sing *Kumbaya* every night together. So, they do desire harmony and that's a beautiful thing, but their struggle is that they have a hard time being honest about their own feelings. They're too vulnerable, being in the other person's head saying, "Well, if I say it this way then they'll react that way" or "If I say it like that then she or he will do that" so they end up deferring typically and avoiding the conversation. Even more scary, they sometimes can build resentment over time because they haven't shared their truth in that moment.

Yesterday at the 5:15PM service, Rich was leading contemporary worship and he talked about the fact that he played tennis yesterday. It so reminded me of a time when I was playing tennis with a person I knew somewhat well, and we had to stop playing because his cell phone went off and it was his wife's ringtone. So he went and got the phone and he chatted with her for a couple of minutes and he came back over to me and said, "Well, we have to stop playing tennis for a couple of minutes." I said okay, and his body confidence had changed. He just seemed really discouraged. He said, "You're a counselor, right?" I said, "No, I'm not a counselor." Off the clock! He said, "You know, I'm really struggling because we have to wait a couple of minutes until my son gets here and he's riding his bike and my wife wants me to call her when he gets here to let her know that he's safe. And I respect that and I want to validate her feelings, but he's 14-and-a-half-years-old, Todd, and it's two blocks, right?" And so he's worried about her worry, but he doesn't know what to say. So he asks and I said, "Well, what are you thinking?" And I couldn't say, "What are you feeling?" because he's a guy, you know? So, "What are you thinking?" And he said, "You know, I'm just worried about her worry and I don't know what to say" and I said, "Why don't you pray—and he's a believer—why don't you pray for a moment next time it happens; be contextually honest. If there's

a moment that comes up where you feel like her worry is hard for you, just let her know that. Say, “I love you honey, but I’m just worried about your worry. What do you think?” So, it was probably a week or so later and he texted me and he said, “That was the worst advice you ever gave me.” It didn’t go well, right? And I think that’s the biggest dilemma for the pleasers, John, is they . . . like he could have said *I did the wrong thing. It didn’t go well, God wasn’t in it. I didn’t pray well enough* versus *no, God was with you in that; you spoke your truth*. The truth of their story is that it helped them actually have a dance of give and take and of him sharing his feelings. His wife eventually was glad that he actually shared what he was actually experiencing and they’re figuring that part of their story out. And their kids win because of that, too. Otherwise the default is just to avoid it.

John speaking

You know, I think one of the things Todd says here is seen in the letter of the Galatian Church; it’s wrong to say spiritually immature people don’t fight or that things are bad when there’s conflict. It’s just not true! Unless we are willing to enter into conflict, we can’t have honest relationship. What I want to do though is say, I agree with that, but how do I make this so that it doesn’t result with terrible things happening to our relationships? So as we enter into a stressful relationship, Todd, or a situation, and we attempt to at least want to speak the truth, what are a couple of strategies that we could all use next time?

Todd speaking

So, the first thing that is really key, especially for the truth-tellers, is to speak without offending. So if I’m leading out toward a person I’ve been hurt by, how am I doing leading out in an interactive way? “Hey, when this happened yesterday my feelings were really hurt. I’m struggling with that today and I just want to let you know that. How do you see that or what are your thoughts about that?” Be very interactive lead-out verses kind of coming at them with “You’ve always done this to me. I can’t stand you. You better fix this.” You know, kind of being integrative and parental toward them.

John speaking

So, do talk about it and talk about it intentionally, but find ways to speak without being offensive or judgmental right at the beginning.

Todd speaking

Which then gives the receiver the best chance to do number two, which is: listen without defending. Good luck with both of these by the way...I mean, they’re really hard because I think a lot of folks may have been so hurt by interactions growing up that they don’t have that much skin left, and so if I disagree with somebody, they might view that as an attack versus just a disagreement. So you and I as believers—hopefully a higher call for us—when a friend of ours or spouse or whoever we’re thinking about today,

when they come to us with something they're hurt by that we've done, let's do the best we can to let the feeling land and not defend our self and just try to understand what they went through or what we did, usually unintentionally, that hurt them or bothered them. So, if we can not get defensive and try to win back or prove that they're wrong, but just try to let the feelings land, I have found that if those first two volleys happen that way, that really helps the conflict a lot.

John speaking

So, a person takes a risk, starts a conversation, is trying to say, *I'm not sure if I'm going to be able to say this the right way*, so they're trying not to offend. The other person then, is trying to listen without defending, becoming so defensive...and you can just see it in people, can't you? They are waiting for you to stop so they can say what they are already planning to say. They aren't listening at all. They're strategizing and waiting for you to just stop your lips talking. If I can stop and just listen, it changes the dynamic a little bit.

Todd speaking

Yeah, it sure does. And then the third step is to be able to agree to disagree sometimes. My wife and I have been married 28 years. We have 26, 25, and 23-year-old daughters. We haven't always agreed on parenting styles and we still don't, you know? There are a lot of things we do agree on, but we might disagree on that sometimes, and that's okay. We're trying to understand each other's viewpoint, or we'll get in a fight about it, or disagree about it. We still know we're for each other, but sometimes I think in conflict, it's important to realize that sometimes we're going to agree to disagree. That's not Minnesota nice or wishy-washy, that's just the truth. Sometimes we will see things differently and especially if we're that truth-teller, we have to be careful that we don't keep pushing until we win.

John speaking

So, if I'm the truth-teller I have to allow the other person the dignity of sitting there in her wrongness—I mean sitting there with her position and respecting her, and the people-pleaser needs to say, "Get used to a little uncomfortable silence here; you are not necessarily wrong."

Todd speaking

Yes. And the best news for the people-pleasers is that for the rest of their life, all they have to be is honest. Honesty today prevents problems tomorrow for the pleaser. It may cause a problem today, it caused a problem for that tennis player the day of, but eventually it freed him up. Pleasers, when they avoid the mess, they really carry the mess, so the older I get . . . (John intervenes)—two things I want to just stop and hear again, you said, "Pleasers avoid the mess so they carry the mess around with them. They bury it until it gets too toxic and smelly and go off someplace else." What was the

first thing about if you tell the truth today you . . .? (Todd steps back in) Honesty today prevents problems tomorrow. (John)—Honesty today prevents problems tomorrow. (Back to Todd)—Because usually the honesty is a boundary that the pleasers say *I just got to be honest*, you know? So, it caused a reaction in my friend's wonderful bride, but she eventually was glad that he shared what he had to say. So they're dialoging now and they don't always agree, but they have a new dance that's better than their old dance because if they stayed in the old dance, then the kids go, *well, I'll choose that one or I'll choose that one, I'll choose to be this or I'll choose to be that*, so now they have a dance that's more truth and grace together. Messy sometimes, but together in truth and grace. So agreeing to disagree is important and those are a couple of keys.

The last one is hard to do as well, like all of these are. So we see the value in agreeing to disagree, and then the biggest one is being able to own our own part. So how do you and I do with coming back after the conflict? Reestablishing dialogue...and if there's anything that we did on our end that was hurtful, let's be that person that's full of mercy, full of grace—that's not co-dependent, we're owning our part.

I remember working with a truth-teller and she really wanted to build grace into her story, build more empathy into her story, because she could see that she was unintentionally running her family over with a truck every day emotionally, you know? Not meaning to, but just an amazing person, confident leader, but just wasn't creating a place where people could actually interact with her as much. So she and her sister had a tough argument and by that time they were in their fifties. She had done some work and eventually she came back to her sister and said, *You know, for that argument last week, for those words I said, I can't tell you how sorry I am* and that changed their relationship forever because her sister, for the first time, heard the mercy from her sister and it freed her up just to love her better. And so there's a real power in being able to own our own part. It doesn't mean we're weak; it means we're content and confident enough in ourselves in Christ to own our own part.

John speaking

I love that. Again, that's what the apostle Paul is doing. Remember, there was that phrase there that said, "Carry one another's burdens." I think what Todd taught me the first time we talked about this was sometimes the most important conversation is the second conversation. The one you're going back to and saying, *honey, I am so sorry that I said that you were stupid for believing that. I was just wrong on several levels there. Can I try again?* The second conversation allows for the option to say *I have a part in this as well. We need to carry one another's burdens and say, this is not your problem, this is our problem.* Doesn't mean it's my fault; it means it's our burden to carry together. I love that.

Todd speaking

One last thing—I think what's really key when we go into these conversations and try to do these strategies is to really try to manage our physical feelings that we're going

through. And Dan said it great with the Children's Sermon about that deep breath, that self-soothing we do in Christ by bringing the Holy Spirit in there and saying, "This is going to be a tough conversation, God. I know You're for us and I know You're with us. It's going to be a tough conversation." But how am I doing with regulating my engine before I go into that situation? Because my body's on fire sometimes when I go into a tough situation, especially for more of a pleaser, but even truth-tellers are ramped up. So how are we doing with regulating first, self-soothing a little bit through prayer, through bringing the Holy Spirit into that process as best as we can? I think it's a good tip before entering those situations.

John speaking

Becoming aware of the pain, anxiety, adrenaline that's fueling all of this.

Todd speaking

So we're managing it versus it managing us, because usually that's why most of these conversations go south; the stress and the trauma trump what the truth is. The truth is we're trying to resolve this together, and if we can manage those anxieties, and fears, and worries a little bit better that helps a ton.

John speaking

Can you guys see not just a rabbit trail, but can you guys see why I believe in the power of Christian counseling? That there are sometimes things I just can't see, and when somebody out here helps, we can get to a new place. I would just really encourage you. This is just, you know, \$200 an hour kind of stuff . . . if you please would just send the money to me, I'll pass that along to Todd as he deserves, but can we just thank Todd here for a second? *Audience applauds.

I need to say this the right way: every relationship you have is a neurotic relationship because you're in it. And yet, it is not a hopeless relationship because together the God of hope comes to all of us, and wants to redeem, and wants to offer you the opportunity of hope. I believe that to my core. If there has been something said here that you think you need to take into the next conversation, I would just encourage you to not try to do all four of those in the next session. Pick one. What do I need to work on in this idea of talking in ways that show the other person I love them enough that I will have this conversation with them and God will show up?

Lord Jesus, I thank You that You loved us when we were schleps, before we had it together, and I know that because You love me this morning and You love me right now, and none of us have it together. I ask You, God, to teach me how to love others better, whether that is by learning to speak without offending, or to listen without defending, or to own the part of the mess that I am responsible for, or to come back with a fresh perspective. Dear God, You want us, as Your children, to learn to love one another. It gives You delight. I pray that as we go

through the hard times, You will offer us hope, and grace, and mercy. That we might share one with another. Teach us to love in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. 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.