

Have the Conversation

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

John 13: 1, 33-36, and 14:1-3, 19-21

I've come to a sort of awkward realization over the last year or so. As many of you know, I've spent the majority of my ministry in healthcare. I've spent a lot of time over the years teaching about advance care planning, mostly encouraging (pleading with, exhorting) people to complete their advance directives. What I've come to realize is that I—that *we* in healthcare have been going about this all wrong. Because unfortunately, life is rarely as simple as a five-page legal document makes it seem.

So often our conversations around advance care planning center on the use of technology in the final days or weeks of someone's life. Do you want be connected to a machine that breathes for you? Do you want a medically-prescribed formula to provide your only calories?

As I see it now, there are two problems with that. First, those questions are asking regular people like you and me to make pretty major decisions about extraordinarily complex medical situations. There's a reason that doctors go to school for so many years—the human body is an intricate tangle of systems and it is hard to understand how they all fit together. So it's really unfair to ask people their opinion about topics that they don't have all the information on. The second problem is that we all die. All of us. And so these legal documents give you a

chance to say “No, I don’t want that,” but if you say, “Yes, I do want all the mechanical support,” there’s no follow up to say, “When is it ok to stop?”

I’m guessing that many of you noticed the back of the bulletin looks a little different this week. If you haven’t looked at it yet, I invite you to flip your bulletin over and take a look. These are a few of the “Where I Stand” scales and they’re taken from a brilliant resource called The Conversation Project. The Conversation Project is an initiative that promotes conversation about broader issues tied to serious illness. It’s trying to shift the conversation away from the moment of death to the extensive swath of *life* that happens first. So instead of saying, “Dialysis: thumbs up or thumbs down?” it asks you to locate yourself along a continuum. “If I had a terminal illness, I would prefer to...Not know how quickly it was progressing?” Or “Know my doctor’s best estimation for how long I have to live?” Or somewhere in between? These scales are meant to be stepping stones into conversations about values, hopes, and fears, to help us articulate what’s important to us in life, as well as in a medical context.

So why are we talking about this here, in church? Don’t these conversations belong in a doctor’s office or hospital waiting room? Sure they do. But the thing is, these are big conversations—and only part of them (the end part) belongs in a health care setting. Because what your doctor mostly needs to know is which test results to share with you, which medical interventions to do or not to do. All the

other parts belong in our everyday lives: at home, at work, at church, at the dinner table, at coffee hour, during holidays.

This is hard. But as UCC theologian Glennon Doyle Melton says, “We can do hard things.” Within the scope of Christian tradition there is a reassuring depth and breadth of experience. The author of Ecclesiastes sums it up so well in the poem we heard earlier: a time to seek, and a time to lose; a time to keep silence, and a time to speak; a time to be born, and a time to die. All of these things describe what it means to be human, to live fully. And most of us know that, at least in a cerebral, cognitive way. Sometimes we build, sometimes we tear down. Sometimes we mourn, sometimes we dance. What I think is the hard part is knowing when to transition from one to the other. How do we know when we’ve been silent too long and it’s time to speak? How do we know when we’ve been keeping for too long and it’s time to let go?

I think there are two things that help us know when to change. The first is practice. I have whatever the opposite of a green thumb is and I find the task of gardening to be overwhelming, verging on mysteriously impossible. But an experienced gardener can tell the exact right time to harvest ripe fruits and knows when to pull up the husks of the old plants and put in new ones. And practice means getting it wrong, doing a little better, getting it wrong, doing a little better, getting it wrong—you get the idea. But embedded in this idea of practice is the

idea that change and transition are all around us and they can be done well if we are prepared.

The other element that sustains us through transitions is relationship. Relationships are what call us out of ourselves and link us to deeper rhythms. How does a gardener know when to plant and when to reap? By being in touch with the land and the seasons. How do we know when to keep quiet and when to start talking about transitions toward the end of life? By being in relationship with those around us, paying attention to their hopes and worries, sharing their joys and burdens.

We often tell people to have conversations within their families, but let's be honest: not all families are places where these conversations can be had. For some of us, relatives are physically distant; for some, "family" is not a safe place; some of us are the last living branch on the family tree. So this is an area where church—more specifically, First Church—can lead the way. Church is one of the few remaining places in society where we experience the spectrum of ages all in one place.

It's also a place where we draw on that deep wisdom of the Christian tradition, that reminds us that laugh and we weep, we mourn and we dance, we are born and we die; it also gives us many examples of how to practice these kinds of conversations in relationship. Jesus spent an awfully long time talking to his

disciples about leaving—about dying. I think he did this for several reasons, but probably most of all he did it to prepare them. To prepare them for the fact that he would not always be with them physically.

Pulling on deeper wisdom from our tradition we see that Moses does it too. Moses guided the Israelites through the wilderness for 40 years and just as they got to the edge of the Promised Land he had to prepare the Israelites and his successor Joshua for his death. He said, “I am now a hundred and twenty years old. I am no longer able to get about, and the Lord has told me, ‘You shall not cross over this Jordan.’” The great prophet Elijah, he of miracles and finding God in the silence, also has to prepare his successor Elisha for the fact that he will not continue to be with him—Elisha, by the way, tries really hard not to have the conversation—before being taken up in the fiery chariot.

So I’m going to take a minute to talk to the Moseses and Elijahs here. These are the folks here who have, shall we say, a lot of life wisdom; the folks who may be entering the long shadow of their mortality; the matriarchs and patriarchs. I’m not going to assign you to that group—you decide for yourself if this fits. But what I say to you is this: we need you to lead the way for us. We need you to model gracefulness, courage, and hard conversations. Just as you taught us how to be bigger children, better adults, faithful disciples, fierce advocates, so too we need you to teach us what it looks like to age, to struggle, to grapple with mortality. We

need to hear you say, “These are the things that make my life worth living and these are the things I most value. But if I can’t watch my stories or tend to my garden or enjoy my grandchildren, I don’t want you to fight God and nature to keep me here. If I can’t speak, make the best decisions you can, and know that I love you.” We need to hear those things because one day we will teach the same lessons; and we need to hear them because our stories are not complete without yours.

And now I need to talk to the Joshuas and the Elishas here. These are the folks who are coming up, who are in the middle of things, the folks who will be next in line. Again, I’m not assigning anyone to a group—and you may decide that you fit in both groups. Up to you. But what we need from you is for you to cultivate your gracefulness, courage, and practice hard conversations. We need you to seek out the Moseses and the Elijahs to soak up what they have to teach, to learn about the fullness of life, to prepare for when you must lead the way.

“Seeking out” doesn’t mean passively waiting for someone to talk to you, by the way. It means actively looking for opportunities and spending the time. We need to hear you say, “I’m worried and sad when I think about not being with you. I want to know what’s important to you so I can do everything possible to make those things happen. I need to learn how we can best care for you.”

These conversations are hard. They're hard. We have to practice, which means doing it wrong and trying again. (Ask me sometime about my absolute failure in having this conversation with my in-laws. I bombed completely. And I do this for a living.) But we have to keep at it, because these are the threads that weave us together, one-on-one and generation to generation. Jesus spent so much time preparing his disciples not just to cushion them from the shock of his death, but to equip them for the work that they would have to continue: “‘Where I am going, you cannot come.’ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

We are indeed called to love each other and love the world. We are called to pass that love from generation to generation, first learning and then modeling the way. We are called to be present for each other in times of mourning and dancing, laughing and weeping, war and peace—through the fullness of life. This fullness can't be captured or contained by legal papers because it is made of stronger fibers, fibers that stretch back to our ancestors' ancestors. Yes, these are hard conversations. But the good news is, we can do hard things. We are the church and we were made for this.

Amen.