

Pastor's Letter – April, 2016

We enjoyed 3 marvelous presentations during our Lenten speaker series this year, first with Sue Forsyth as she shared nuggets from her 3 journeys to Israel, then skipping back home to hear Ray Henry unpack the mystery of the origins of the Seneca's, almost literally in our back yard, and then jetting back across the sea with Pic Schade to Lesotho to check in with our friends in Africa. Thousands of miles, many stories, and no discernible jet lag. We didn't even have to return our seats to an upright position.

I enjoyed these presentations front to back. However, it was one tiny reference during the Lesotho talk that has lingered with me. In an African culture largely devoid of shopping malls, I-pads or even consistent electric power, fun is where you find it...and where you make it. I thought it fascinating that one of the popular past-times among the Lesotho youth is...debating...in English! Leaving aside the towering obstacle of conversing in a foreign language, I was intrigued by the attraction of debate.

In all honesty, I didn't hear the actual debates. The brief video segment of the debate was short and the sound was a bit garbled. However, what was obvious to me even in the short "bite" was the enthusiasm of these well-dressed, well-mannered debaters as they eagerly took the podium to present their views. I had to wonder if they might be able to teach us a thing or two about the art of civil discourse, an art that many in America have deemed essentially dead and buried.

In a season when people of faith celebrate new life returning to things that were previously dead and buried, I wonder how we might reinvigorate this vanishing art. Here's one hint I've found helpful: When I want to share a point of view...I need to be clear that what I'm sharing is mine...not some divinely sanctioned "11th commandment" presented as though I'd just found it etched upon a gold tablet somewhere. In other words, "an ounce of humility is worth a pound of contention."

I haven't a clue what issues the kids in Lesotho were debating. Maybe it was the relative merits of soccer versus polo. Maybe it was how best to smear their dirt dwellings. But it occurs to me that debate may be like weight-lifting: start out light...and work your way up.

Perhaps our presidential candidates would have done well to begin by debating how best to make a peanut-butter and jelly sandwich and, in time, with demonstrated good behavior, they could address the preferred method of folding dish towels. In time, with proven civility, they might then broach questions of policy. But not before.

A good chunk of the New Testament is directed toward people who couldn't get along. The apostle Paul manned the original crisis hot-line, with the distinct disadvantage of having to address his conflicts by mail...very slow mail. The response time was very different...but the issues were not: people with widely differing opinions trying to live and work and survive together.

Time and again, Paul kept returning to the underpinnings of effective human engagement: respect, patience, humility, forgiveness, and – if it's not too much to ask – love. The youth in Lesotho are learning to debate...and my guess is that, as they do so, they are carefully monitored and guided by adult mentors. They have a good excuse: they're young and inexperienced. But what of the "old and experienced"? Apparently, we need guidance, too.

In this Easter season of new life, perhaps we can invite ourselves to go "back to the basics" – revisiting those essential, precious qualities of human dialogue...qualities that make discourse civil. Perhaps as we do, our ideas and even our opinions can be restored to the status of "gifts" rather than "missiles" – to the benefit of all. I figure it this way: if a dead guy can be brought back to life, then there just might be hope for politics, too! At least that's my Easter prayer!

Blessings to you all!
Tim