

**Small Talk – June 21 2021**  
**By Michael Small**

I have said it before – language, words matter! At their best, the words we use amongst each other will crack open up free and fair conversation. There is a flow to our listening and responding. As we converse there can be a playful dialogue, somewhat like a dance. And yes, there may be a missteps, we clarify and if needed we apologize – but after all is said and done, the dance goes on. Yet, words at their worst will shut down the free and easy flow of conversation between persons. Rage, blaming, and judging another is never helpful. When we stop listening, it is too easy to simply make careless judgments. Then persons walk away with misunderstanding and hurt feelings. It is difficult to stay in hard places. But we must come back together. We must do the reset, over and over again, until we truly hear one another – then the dance can begin again as we learn new steps and new moves.

I am reminded of an old joke. In a prison setting, inmates loved to share jokes. It would pass the time. Often, they were the same familiar jokes told over and over again. So rather than taking the time to retell the jokes in detail, the inmates decided they would assign a number to each joke. Late at night, when all was still, someone would yell out “44” and everyone would laugh hysterically. Another would yell out “18”, the laughter became infectious. It would go on through the evening. Then someone yelled out “6” – no laughter. One prisoner turned to another and asked, “What’s the deal, no laughter?” The other prisoner responded by saying, “Oh, he could never tell a joke!”

Rather than going into detail, by describing the whole theory or process, we like those prisoners, create a kind of shorthand to quicken the pace of the conversation. We might say “Oh, that is a ‘Right to Life’ organization.” Or “That is a ‘Pro-Life’ organization”. We speak about being rural or urban, from the north or from the south. Even the terms liberal and conservative become shorthand as do the words republican and democrat. There is the left-wing and the right-wing. All of these phrases hold value and judgment. It might be more helpful to probe the depths of each category, organization, and person. Then we discover that too often simply labeling or naming a person or organization by a category or label is misleading and does not speak to the whole truth of the complexity of each issue, person, or organization. It is too easy to simply live in a world of assumptions, and never know the truth or the whole story, and yes, the rest of the story.

Let’s use the examples of Pro-Life and Right-to-Life. Each category speaks to a stance concerning abortion – but there is so much more. Between the two organizations I suspect they share more common ground rather those distinct beliefs that make each unique. Both speak to the precious nature of life, living, birth, miracle, celebration, grief, loss, death, and choice. And, of course, I think all of us are prolife! We value living. We also value the rights that each individual has. To clearly understand all the issues means that we have to dive deep in our conversations before making judgments about another person’s or organizations choices, values, and beliefs.

The real world that we live in is not simply defined by labels. As an example, we define a 24-hour period by using the words day and night. Think about it. There are many shades and variations between day and night. For between the day and night there is a variety of light between dawn and dusk. Each moment is differently lighted. And no day or night is identical to another.

We do not live in a world of black and white or where everything and every nuance is perfectly known or expressed. When speaking, hopefully there will always be spontaneously authentic conversations. These conversations may become difficult as we seek to uncover the truth, allow it to unfold before us. Receive the truth. In the middle of these conversations, there may struggle to use the best, most concise, informative words.

In all of our conversations may we be held by a spirit of love, grace, openness and, when needed, forgiveness. Speak well!

In the spirit and agape love of Jesus, Michael

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