Good & Beautiful & Kind
Chapter 7 ~ A Bridge, Not a Barrier

The chapter deals with the inevitable, unavoidable reality of conflict. We may not like conflict, we might actually be very conflict-adverse, but if we're going to have relationships of any kind, we're going to have to deal with conflict. And if we're going to have healthy relationships, then we're going to have to learn how to deal with conflict in a healthy way…and even use conflict to build and deepen our relationships.

- *What is your general attitude and approach toward conflict…or potential conflict? (Avoid, minimize, deny, stir up, hit it head on, etc.) More specifically, if you're willing, describe a recent conflict you've been a part of.*

- *How was conflict modeled/handled in your family of origin? What messages regarding conflict did you pick up?*

- *What patterns can you identify in your relationships (with spouse, children, parents, co-workers, etc.) regarding conflict? How does the nature of the relationship affect how you deal with conflict?*

Rich offers some very important clarifying comments…"*I'm referring to a serious disagreement regarding a meaningful situation…I'm* ***not*** *referencing abuse. I'm* ***not*** *advocating for you to remain in dehumanizing situations. I'm* ***not*** *encouraging perseverance in relationships marked by a clear violation of boundaries. I'm talking about the normal and often emotionally charged disagreements we have…Conflict is* ***not*** *a sign of unhealth. It's unhealthy to* never *have conflict.*" (page 139, emphasis added)

Rich lays out three stages of relationships (he calls them "heavenly", "hellish", and "holding-the-tension"…he does like to alliterate.) To illustrate those three phases differently, we could call them, 1. See no warts; 2. Only see warts; 3. Warts and all. In other words, we choose what we focus (or fixate) on. I am reminded of something Dallas Willard said, "*The ultimate freedom we have as human beings is to select what we will allow or require our minds to dwell upon.*"

The apostle Paul seems to concur with Willard and offers this advice in his letter to the Philippians (we went through Philippians back in the spring), "*Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable–if anything is excellent and praiseworthy–think about such things.*" (Philippians 4:8) Again, we have the power to choose what we focus on. There is good and bad, positive and negative, maturity and immaturity in all of us. What we choose to focus on also says something about us.

- *Share how you've experienced the different stages/phases of a relationship.*

- *As you consider some of the key/important people and relationships in your life, what do you choose to focus on? What do you do with the challenging aspects/characteristics/traits of those people? How do the less-than-ideal characteristics of you affect those relationships?*

Rich posits that healthy conflict requires confrontation, by which he means "face time" (see pages 145-147). Put simply, it means that we acknowledge the issue (as opposed to avoiding, denying, minimizing, ignoring, sweeping it under the rug) and do so in an honoring and respectful way, which is generally face to face.

Sadly, we see very few healthy examples of confrontation…so much so that, I suspect, the word "confrontation" probably sounds very aggressive and attacking. But what if we could change how we perceived that word? What if we thought of confrontation as a form of caring. (There's actually a classic book called *Caring Enough to Confront* by David Augsburger.) I think it's easy to trick ourselves into thinking that avoiding conflict and/or confrontation is somehow caring but, in reality, it's actually fearful (thus not loving) and perhaps even selfish. Is it possible that we're involved in less-than-healthy relationships because of our fear to confront when necessary?

- *If you're willing, share a time when you were lovingly confronted by someone. How did it go? Or share a time when you lovingly confronted someone. How did it go?*

Rich notes that one way we avoid confrontation is through triangulation. Instead of talking to the person we have the issue/conflict with, we turn to a sympathetic ear. Now, there might be a time to get a third party perspective on something, but it comes with the risk of it turning into gossip, manipulating someone's perspective on the person we have an issue with, and, again, avoiding the person that we really need to be dealing with. Questions we may want to ask ourselves when struggling to broach an issue with someone include:

- ➢ Is this the most loving and mature way I can deal with this?
- ➢ How is fear affecting me?
- ➢ What's at stake here?
- ➢ What result do I hope to see?

These questions, and others like them, help us to prayerfully process the situation. (Please note that I said "prayefully"…we definitely want to bring God into the situation. He's always a good sounding board.)

- *As you assess the relationships in your life, are you currently avoiding a conflict/confrontation? How is that affecting you? How is that affecting the relationship?*

- *As you consider the phenomena of triangulation, how have you experienced it in the relationships you're in or relationships you've observed?*

In Matthew 18, Jesus does offer us a pattern to follow in interpersonal conflict with relationships that are within the faith community, namely…

- ➢ Go to the person one on one.
- ➢ If that doesn't work, bring one or two other people into the situation.
- ➢ If that doesn't work, bring it before the faith community.

This is a pattern that values and embraces respectful conflict, peacemaking, and accountability. BUT, and this is important, this assumes the power dynamic between the two people having conflict is pretty equal. This is not a prescribed pattern if the power dynamic in the relationship is out of balance. A one-on-one confrontation when one party holds more power than the other is not advised.

Additionally, when we approach conflict/confrontation, the goal isn't (or shouldn't be) to "win" or to control, but peace, relational wholeness and connectedness, and, if necessary, reconciliation. This is at the heart of what it means to "fight cleanly". But it requires certain communication skills…"soul-speech" and careful listening.

"Soul-speech" is "*…plainness of heart and clarity of speech…*", it's about speaking from "*…the vulnerable, tender, animating part of yourself that tends to be hidden under the hard exterior of anger.*" (pages 152 & 153) Again, the goal is to connect, not to "win". Rich advises adopting phrases like, "*I notice…*", "*I value…*", "*I feel…*", and approaching such conversation by asking for permission and ending with a clear ask/request (see pages 153-155). Practically speaking, taking the time to articulate our thoughts and feelings with these types of phrases allows us to slow down (which is always helpful when in conflict, so as to avoid reactivity) and allows us to drill down to what is really bothering us. Asking permission allows the other person to prepare themselves to receive more openly and less reactively.

We all likely think we are better listeners than we actually are. But, in reality, we can be defensive, closed, inconsiderate, and focusing on what we're going to say next as opposed to listening to the heart of the person sharing with us. As Stephen Covey writes, "*Most people don't listen with the intent to understand, they listen with the intent to reply.*"

I suspect that we don't want to be that kind of person yet we haven't developed the skills of good, careful listening to the point that they are second nature. Friends, for all our talk about "love others", "love neighbor", etc., unless we learn to listen well, we'll never be that great at loving. As Rich says, "*…the hallmark of someone who is growing in love is one who can listen non-defensively.*" (page 155) Listening IS loving.

- *How good of a listener are you? How are you evaluating yourself? What would those closest to you say? What practices are you utilizing to become a better listener?*

- *Who is someone you know that is a good listener? Describe a time when you felt loved because you were heard and understood (i.e. truly listened to).*

In order to love well, we must first embrace our own belovedness. We have to receive God's love and function from the safe, secure union with God. This takes us back to contemplative prayer and also points us toward the Table of Communion. In other words, we have

personal/individual practices that keep us grounded in God's love (prayer), and we have communal/collective practices (corporate worship, communion, etc.) that keep us rooted in God's love. The question is, are we doing our part to receive and abide in God's love and then allow that to be the place from which we function?

- *What are you doing to ensure that you are abiding in Christ? What practices are you finding helpful?*

The Table of Communion is our reminder of the lengths that God will go to to heal the conflict, the broken relationship, between Himself and us (a fracture that we caused). It points us to the Cross as the cost/sacrifice that it took, and it points us to the goal the God desires…a family reconciled and united around a table enjoying one another. It is a beautiful and powerful symbol. The Table tells us that conflicts are meant to be overcome, healed, and even a tool for transformation.

- How has the Lord's Supper/Communion strengthened/deepened your relationships with fellow believers?

<u>Soul Training Exercise ~ Soul-Speaking & Careful Listening Through the Rhythm of Attention</u>

A practice I have found helpful and formative in learning to speak from my soul, as well as in becoming a better listener, is called The Rhythm of Attention. There are three main elements to this practice. (FYI…you will need at least one other person in order to do this exercise.)

1. Pay attention to your own thoughts, feelings, desires, and fears. Identify and name them. (It can be helpful to use the acronym S.A.S.H.E.T. ~ Sad, Angry, Scared, Happy, Excited, Tender. Or you might find it helpful to use a Feelings Wheel…Google it) Make a regular, even daily, practice of identifying what's going on inside of you.

2. With a friend or two, share your feelings, what's going on inside of you. (This is the "soul-speaking" part.)

3. Allow your friend(s) to share what they're feeling, what's going on inside of them. (This is the "listening carefully" part.) Listen, not to fix or make them feel better…just listen to know and understand. (Asking clarifying questions or reflecting back what you've heard is appropriate.)

Try to make steps 2-3 a regular (weekly?) practice.

You might be thinking to yourself that this sounds like earlier Soul Training Exercises in this series…namely, get to know others and let others get to know you. And you would be correct. This is simply an invitation to go a little deeper and add some regularity/consistency to the practice. This is also a good way to develop "spiritual friendships".