

Being Imperfect Together – 04-16-15

To Say or Not to Say? These Are the Questions

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Temptation comes in so many forms. Of course there's the usual suspects: food, drink, overspending on the latest want masquerading as a need come to mind, along with a plethora of other distractions. All of us strive to live our lives according to our stated values and aspirations, but...

Temptation also arrives in the form of the urge to spread a story or juicy quote, or perhaps let loose with an ill-conceived bit of "feedback" that's just plain hurtful despite our best intentions to merely be helpful.

In my sessions with clients I will often suggest 3 questions to help discern whether it's a good idea to say something or keep one's mouth shut. I've seen variations on this theme in a number of places, but here are the ones I've found most useful, plus a bonus question for those of us in a church community:

1. Is it true?

The solid, healthy basis for any comment, no matter how seemingly innocuous, is the simple question, "Is it true?" Relationship conflict is virtually guaranteed when someone tells a story or offers a comment to another based on a falsehood, whether intentional or unintentional. Not sure if it's true? Best to not say anything, or check very humbly and carefully for truthfulness: "I heard something that surprised/confused/disturbed me, and I want to check on whether that's true or not." Then ask about it.

2. Is it necessary?

If something a person has heard serves no purpose other than having something to talk about, it probably doesn't need to be said. This is especially true if it's something from a 3rd or 4th hand source, but even secondhand sources can be suspect. Giving in to the temptation to lay a gratuitous critical comment on someone may also serve no productive purpose beyond asserting one's own selfish needs to get one over on the target of their words and feel better about themselves in some way.

3. Is it kind?

Applying a kindness standard for talking about someone or giving feedback establishes a strong likelihood of being aligned with "the better angels of our nature." I'm not referring to the kind of seemingly kind statements such as "Bless her heart," or "God love her," delivered right after a cutting remark about someone's appearance or other personal characteristic. I mean practicing the kind of empathy that asks, "Would I want someone to say that about me in that way?" Real

kindness acts from true concern for the other's well-being and feelings, and seeks to support and encourage rather than separate and disparage.

And, the "bonus question:"

4. Will it build a stronger community?

A strong community is based in large measure on the quality and supply of loving safety in the members' interactions with each other. Safety in the community relational sense refers, in part, to knowing that the others will do their best to be respectful and sensitive to each other in all their dealings, in both good times and bad. It also means that no one makes deliberate attempts to hurt another, and if someone has a bad moment and ends up hurting another, a prompt and full effort to repair the hurt quickly ensues. Asking ourselves if telling a story about someone or giving them a comment will help build a stronger community brings our internal moral compass for relationships into play, and this allows each of us to contribute to the living work of relational art that is a worthwhile aspiration for all of us here at Sts. Clare & Francis.

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