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Getting Cracked Open

Have you ever found yourself saying, "I love you" to someone unexpectedly? The words somehow just fall out of your mouth before you can filter or retrieve them. It is not necessarily a romantic love being expressed; it is deeper. The Greeks called it agape love; unconditional, unselfish love for someone who has become your friend. Most people would agree; there is no greater gift in this world than to have friends who know you, stand by you no matter what circumstances may come your way.

One of the most surprising and sad things I have learned in my international ministry is that so few countries in the world have social workers or psychological counselors, let alone, faith-based or Christian counselors available to them. Millions of people around the globe everyday are enduring tremendous psychological hardships and challenges with little to no professional help available to them. Often, churches and pastors, along with family and friends, are the only people in a given town who are able to offer guidance and help during crises and hardships.

A good friend of mine, Rev. Donald Wehmeyer, is a missionary to the Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico. Among his many activities, he teaches theology at the Presbyterian seminary, San Pablo, in the city of Merida. Donald knows well how few counseling services are available in the Yucatan Peninsula. He teaches his students the very basics of psychology and counseling so they can offer rudimentary social services to their communities.



About 20 years ago, Donald developed a counseling program for local, Mexican churches, which is still being used today. The program teaches the church community three basic things; how to say, "I love you," "I forgive you," and "I am sorry." Donald believes these three emotions are often the most difficult for humans to articulate, though they are the most essential elements and psychological practices to be found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. If we can loosen our tongues, lead with our hearts, and be brave enough to speak, our relationships can be transformed or greatly improved by the simplest yet profound teachings of the Gospel.

Unfortunately, it often takes a crisis in our lives to loosen our tongues and hearts. Contrary to what our minds tell us and our emotions fear, moments of crisis can lead us into greater wisdom and a deeper walk with God.

I certainly have had no greater crisis in my life than my current walk with lymphoma cancer. Yet, since my cancer was revealed in early April, no relationship has stayed the same; my relationship with God, my family, friends, and surrounding community. I have had more people tell me they love me, and I in turn, say the same to them. People have felt compelled to say, "I am sorry," and I have felt the same. Forgiveness and love are in the air everywhere I turn.

We humans get so stuck in our ways. Our sin of pride and fear overtake us on a daily basis. We don't change unless we have to; we don't say anything of real emotion and substance unless we are compelled; we get tongue-tied and don't know how to be honest and kind at the same time; the result is we begin to take less risks in our lives and become more frustrated with ourselves.

That is why crises are often unexpected gifts, outside forces, which knock us off our feet and force us to see an old situation in a new light. We thought we were just fine, but suddenly we see our own shortcomings, complacency, even slothfulness as never before.

Crises thrust us into community whether we like it or not. We are vulnerable and we need help. The only way out of our crises is to accept the help and love of others, and say "no" to our illusions of independence. God wants us to be in community and sometimes he has to give us a big shove to get us there.

I will never forget when I was in Uganda in the early 1990s, when war and genocide were raging next door in Rwanda. Dead bodies were floating down the river into Lake Victoria. Rwandans were running across the border into Uganda having narrowly escaped being murdered. AIDS was ripping through Uganda leaving virtually no family unaffected.



Yet, at the same time, the church in Uganda was quadrupling in size. Hundreds of people were entering the kingdom of God by the hour. One crisis after another was stopping people dead in their tracks, revealing their helplessness before God, sin within themselves; and cries for grace and mercy were being heard.

Perhaps we should not fear crises as much as we do. Jesus comes quickly to those in need and to those willing to admit their needs. Our sin is thick and deep, difficult if not impossible to penetrate on our own. If we allow him, God is able to transform our crises into opportunities for healing and growth.

Yet, a crisis is not the only way to draw close to God. We can discipline ourselves and allow ourselves to be led for the sake of staying close to Jesus. The word discipline comes from the word disciple or in the Greek discipolos which means "to learn" or "one who learns". By staying close to our Lord, inviting him to dwell within our hearts, we can discover new boldness to speak up, follow our hearts, and learn to be honest and forthright with our loved-ones and neighbors, just as Jesus did when he walked the earth.

Let us listen again to the words of Jesus when he talked to the multitudes on the Sermon on the Mount:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
 Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
 Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God.
 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
 Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5: 3-10)



My family and I love you and thank you for the love you have given to us.