

Book of Fundamentals Episode One:

“Difficult Conversations”

Episode Summary

Over the series of this podcast, we will be diving into the complexities of conversations and topics that can be difficult to discuss, but are also crucial to understand if we are to learn about our neighbors. We will be providing some “fundamental ideas” and “caution signs” to be mindful of when engaging in conversations with your neighbors, especially those who you may not know very well. The initial proposal for this project was to provide a glossary of important terms or a handbook to guide these types of discussions, but because the context of every individual interaction varies greatly, we instead elected to provide an auditory conversation ourselves. The guide below assists in outlining some of the crucial components of a healthy and productive conversation, as well as marking certain aspects to be mindful of. Some of the key ideas discussed in this episode are listed below, but we strongly encourage listening to the conversation itself to best gain an understanding of how to have these difficult conversations. Please join us for this first episode of the Book of Fundamentals podcast.

Key Points

- All individuals bring their own context to a conversation. Be prepared to discuss the context itself, not just the themes that will be shaped by those individual experiences.
- A “glossary” cannot be provided in the sense that it is desired. So much of what each word means is determined by that individual context, so even the most scholarly definitions will fall short.
- Terms can help to acknowledge aspects of identities, but this also risks reducing individuals to a single identity rather than allowing them to describe the complexities of themselves.

Conversations are an EXCHANGE of information. They should not be approached with a desire to fix things, but a desire to understand and learn.

1. Be ready to be wrong, but also be aware that what you say MATTERS
2. Conversations TAKE TIME. Don't expect immediate comprehension.
3. Don't expect to learn everything, ever. You're instead learning to UNDERSTAND, REFLECT, and ACCEPT.

Episode Details

Book of Fundamentals

- Conversations are so much more than simply the words spoken. Tone, rapport, and the context that participants bring to the table all contribute to the effectiveness of the discussion..
- Engaging in self recognition and reflection better allow space to grow and learn. Ask yourself:
 - Are you prepared to begin a difficult conversation?
 - Are you aware of your privileges?
 - Can you actively listen, participate, and be attentive to one another?
 - Why are you reacting the way that you are? If you feel angry, is there a reason for that, and can you explain it?

Caution Signs

- A specific guide cannot be provided in its entirety for all individuals. There are some themes we can point out, but the key idea is to be open and aware, approaching conversations in a civic manner.
- Some topics or words can trigger negative emotional reactions. If you discuss those possible topics in advance, your conversation is better set to avoid a downward spiral.
- There is a tendency to adopt a “white savior” complex, be mindful of this, and check in with yourself and others.
- Remember that these conversations can be emotionally taxing. Understand that your feelings are valid, but so are theirs. You aren't trying to *attack* with your feelings, but *explain* them.
- These kinds of conversations take a lot of preparation, don't forget that they are difficult for both you *and* the other people involved.

Episode One: Transcript

A.D: Yeah so we have episode 1 for y'all in which we discuss difficult conversations and what that entails. Any key ideas that you guys have in regards to how this conversation is supposed to go?

Emma: Well, part of the reason that we talked about having a conversation was because the original idea– the proposed idea– of having some sort of glossary or handled just couldn't quite fulfill what we were looking for in terms of: you can't provide a set of instructions that people can just follow for any particular situation, because situations vary so much, each individual situation varies so much. And so we ended up heading towards that conversational perspective, or that aspect of this rather than a guideline if the handbook specifically.

Jack: I think we also wanted to move away from saying that we could create some kind of universal handbook. I think the best we can do is try to create some kind of universal guide to looking into how to have a difficult conversation.. but that in and of itself requires context because people will interpret things with their own experiences.

Emma: Well, those experiences are exactly what these conversations are starting to try and hit at: It's trying to understand what someone's perspective is, and their way of getting to that place; where or how that happened, and what they experienced in that time. You can't cross any sort of cultural boundaries or borders that might exist if you don't have a mindset that is going to be prepared to have that kind of conversation.

Jack: We also can't begin to really lay out these caution signs for a difficult conversation without actually knowing anything about the place that we're actually applying it towards. So before we do anything, it's important to try and know a little bit about the context.

Emma: Of course, that being said, we can't provide all the context ourselves as the people who are putting together this project. That is that something that needs to happen as part of that kind of conversation, or even before that starts to happen doing a little bit of your own research into what your areas like, and who you want to be talking to, and what you might need to be aware of before that starts, though that can also just be part of that interaction too.

A.D: Yeah, so I would have to go back to some of the key points that we highlighted. In terms of context, I think it's good for the audience to be aware that context means: Say we have a town—a county— some area, something of that nature, that has 30,000 people, compared to another town that has maybe 200 plus individuals.. I think, within that context, these definitions are broadly different.. So that's why we say that context is super important. So, if you guys have any idea of how to interpret the experiences?

Emma: Well, I think in terms of context, if you've got a large city— I mean we're very used to thinking of something like rural versus urban— you think of something the size of Minneapolis and St Paul versus a small town— that is a very drastic difference, but you can have something that is like you're saying, even that 200 size town versus like a 5,000 person town.. Even that is going to mean that there is a dramatic difference. Of course the experiences of everyone within those towns, whether those are all individuals who are white, or all individuals who identify as a certain gender, or have these experiences— everyone's interpretation of their situation and is going to matter, and is going to be based on whatever their own individual life experience is going to be. That shapes the context of any sort of interaction that occurs.

A.D: That sorta brings me back to this idea of glossary. I remember when we talked about it and had the idea of having a glossary, or that is what was proposed to us actually. You know, the way that I would define certain things wouldn't be applicable to other individuals. So I was taken aback with that idea, and I was very puzzled by how we could sort of formulate these ways of thinking for everybody.. I think a lot of people tend to step into these conversations wanting, not wanting necessarily, but having these preconceived notions of what they believe is correct for the conversation. And I think that in itself is absolutely.

Jack: Words kind of hint at associations. When you define what “immigrant” means, what it means to call someone an immigrant, it's kind of highlighting a portion of an identity of someone, but it also erases other things, so you could be Latin American, but also an immigrant, so calling them an immigrant would inherently overlook being Latin American.

Emma: You can acknowledge aspects of their identity, but in doing so you risk losing something else that makes that person who they are.

Jack: And that just kind of goes into the fact that: words aren't perfect. There aren't ever going to be

any perfect words for a situation. Which is ultimately why conversation matters, because conversation is so much more than just the words that you say, it's the tone of your voice, it's the report that you have with the person, like the body language that you have— that's what conversations are so much better than writing just a hand book, because you can more accurately display your meaning. Which is even why we're recording this podcast right now— because we could write all these things down, but you might have a completely different idea, if you were just reading the transcript of what we were saying, versus listening to the way we were saying it.

Emma: I mean, that applies to you even if you're having this kind of conversation with someone else, and you decide that part of that conversation is putting definitions on words so that you can use those and having a broader discussion of some topic. Those terms, those definitions that you arrive upon are not going to apply universally. The next conversation you have with the next individual is going to have slight adjustments you can't foresee..so, therefore that needs to be like the baseline: Being prepared to have those different understandings, and work from that.

A.D: Yeah absolutely. Jack, I wanted to bring it back to this idea that you had, which are “caution signs.” Can you tell the audience a little bit more about what you meant by that?

Jack: Yeah, so when having such difficult conversations, there are certain things that can kind of trick people into having emotional reactions in which a conversation can spiral into a negative spiral... I think being aware of why these things are caution signs and what causes them, and being able to either avoid them or approach them from a way that doesn't trigger a negative report between you and the person you're trying to talk to— I think it's important to kind of lay these things out before. And again, these are all different based on even the individual level one.

What, me as a white Asian male, what triggers me is very different from what would trigger another white Asian male, because someone may be more Asian presenting, so they have different experiences that lead to different insecurities. So, you can't make “This is how you approach the conversation when you're talking to someone who is White and Japanese.”

It's so hard to make a guide that's very individual, but we can try and find the things that connect across the board. The ultimate goal is to just be as open as possible to to listen to what other people are saying.

A.D: Yeah absolutely, and I feel like what you're saying brings me back to this sort of proposal that we've gotten from Char which is: How do we engage in conversations, in particular with the ELCA community, right. And being that these are about evangelical churches, and you know they have a large majority of people that they serve, I think that, as you said, it's important to approach the conversations in a civil manner.. but then also realize that certain individuals come from a certain place of privilege that others don't. Knowing that that exists, but then if you're not aware of that...

and also just asking questions. Right? I feel like, a lot of times in conversations, there is always this want to talk over each other.. and I feel like that just disrupts the conversation easily, just like that. I would only encourage the ELCA community to really take time to listen, and hear the voices of these individuals, and what they have to say. Because these conversations are not easy. Only if you truly have the capability, *the capability* to be attentive to others, then change will be made. But it is up to the community.

Emma: It is, but it's also one of those things where, even if you as someone who is part of that Lutheran community are ready to have these conversations, you feel like you've thought about it and prepared your your mind for this sort of discussion, that is something where a conversation needs to be built upon all participants. So even if *you* are ready to go and talk to someone who fits outside of your normal group of people that you're interacting with, they may not be ready for that. And you cannot force something like that. So being prepared to not necessarily have success immediately is also something I think it's important to remember.

A.D: Absolutely. And that brings me back to what we're doing now, to this, you know, we're recording this podcast without knowing what we're going to talk about, and I think that's just, y'know, that's just how conversations are supposed to go. Even with the ridiculousness of that, y'know that's the normality of conversations. And I think that, you know, you don't need to be right when having those conversations. It's okay to be wrong. But just knowing that what you say matters, right? I think there should be an emphasis on knowing that your words will have an impact, whether minuscule or not, there are still some sort of impacts. And I think that, at least for me, it's an important aspect of how I engage in conversations, and I would encourage individuals in this community to do so as well in that manner.

Jack: The problem that I ultimately see in having difficult conversations from the perspective of ELCA talking to immigrants is one that I don't even know how necessarily we can solve.. Because sure, we could tell the ELCA to try and forget their own experiences and be completely receptive to immigrants' experiences, and they could do that. But ultimately, it kind of has to go both ways. Emotional reactions are something that are very hard to control, if they feel that their experiences aren't being considered, then they'll have their own negative emotional reaction, and then these difficult conversations just kind of spiral back into being very negative.

So, conversation is kind of a 2-way street, but on the part of the ELCA. I think it's very important to acknowledge that you do and can have these emotional reactions, but try and not think of it as coming from a place of specifically trying to harm you. For the benefit of having these difficult conversations, you should move past your own experiences in the benefit of understanding someone else. Once you understand someone else, I think they will be more receptive to understanding you.

Emma: I mean acknowledging that discomfort is not necessarily something you can avoid, and that's not a bad thing because that does, as cliché as it is, provide an opportunity for growth. And that is

ultimately what I think everyone is looking for here, is to expand the understanding of their experiences and that of those around them.

Jack: I think it's important to acknowledge that literally all experiences are technically valid, and that there is a reason that you feel the way you do at a certain point. So, well you can understand that your feelings are valid, you should also try to understand other people's feelings are valid too, and work from there. Don't try and attack with your feelings, try to explain your feelings. I think through explaining your feelings— if you are angry, and can explain how you got to be angry in a way that isn't inflammatory, then you can work towards not being angry and continuing the conversation.

Emma: Well, and that helps *you* as an individual understand your own emotional reaction too, so I think that that is, I think that's a very constructive thing.

Jack: And I guess that goes into it another part of this conversation: That there's a huge self reflective aspect that someone has to go through before trying to attempt these difficult conversations.

Emma: And I think part of that is the same thing that we've been talking about, which is their own experience— what has led you to be where you were, I mean, you touched a little bit on privilege and such, and how that's going to impact your experiences growing up, and being where you are now, and how did you come to begin this conversation with someone, to begin to have the desire to have a conversation with people.. so being able to know *why* you are looking for this, and what sort of biases you might be approaching this conversation with— I think it's definitely a good place to start.

A.D: Absolutely. I think just to add more onto the conversation, I would assume a lot of us are aware that the church is predominantly white, and so I would want to caution the church to not approach these conversations within this “white savior complex,” rather this attentive, you know, listening or engagement perspective or skill set.. I think that is extremely valuable for these individuals that you're working towards improving relations with for the long run.

Jack: We should probably go into what white savior complex is, and why it might feel good for the individual, and why it comes off as very condescending and not overly helpful. It feels very good because you're like: “I'm helping someone,” right? But it comes from a place where you're acting from your own self, and you're not really actually thinking about the other person.

Emma: You're also assuming that whatever you know, whatever you believe, is The Best Option for everyone, and that pushes back like privilege, and how your experience has been shaped by that. What might be the best thing for me is not to be the best for you, is not going to be the best for you, my experience and my understanding of the world, as opposed to yours which could be completely different, but not bad by any means, and so I think that was one of the things that we

talked about in class, was that: When you're approaching this sort of thing, you're not going in there trying to convert anyone. You're not going there to try and prove to them that your way is the right way. If anything, you're going to listen, and to build from that, and have that conversation rather than trying to persuade them of something or trying to show them some new light, because that's not actually what should be happening at all.

A.D: Absolutely, and I feel like you both have reiterated the point precisely. In layman's terms, don't approach that conversation with this want to fix things..Approach it from a way of engaging conversations, that's all we ask. You know, learn more about each other, because frankly I feel like in this world we truly don't take time to learn about each other, rather we just... everything has to be so fast paced..

So yeah, when you're trying to deal with this type of issue, in these conversations, these matters, it's important to 1. Not feel like you're being attacked. 2, Feel you have to save everybody, and 3. I just, I would say again, just take time to listen. Y'know, if you don't support the thing that a person has said, that's fine. I mean, that's the point of conversation, that is legit the point of conversation. So I think all in all, they should be absolutely fine if that's the rhetoric...

Emma: Yeah, and not expecting to arrive at any solid conclusions immediately, if ever. I mean, this could be something that runs on so much longer than you expect it to, and that's not a bad thing, you're not going to necessarily come away from the first or third or fifth interaction with someone with a sudden complete shaped knowledge of their life experiences or anything even close to that.. This is for you to begin to understand, but not necessarily ever reach that point where you know everything, because that's not what this should be about.

Jack: I think that's another point– you can't know everything, because things change all the time.. and I guess you should try to work towards just being accepting of whatever is happening in front of you, and just accepting.. like: well these things are true, how does this go based off of what I know, and you can meet them in the middle. You try and say, “well these things are both true, but how are they true together, how can they co-exist?”

A.D: “Thank you guys for listening to this first podcast episode which we titled “Difficult conversations.” As you can probably tell, it is a difficult conversation, and we anticipate it to get more difficult as the conversation goes... So please follow us with more conversation ahead.