

TABLE TALKS

A Ritual for Facilitating Difficult Conversations: Communion Version

© 2018 Liturgy by Dr. Marcia McFee, www.marciamcfee.com
Originally commissioned by the Greater Northwest Area of the United Methodist Church
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Script for Facilitator, Presider, Song Leader and Musician

[There is a center table among the other tables already set with tablecloth, bread, cup, large pillar candle surrounded by stones and the Covenant. A cup with juice and napkin with bread for every table is placed around the perimeter of the center table. See the "Tips for Facilitation" document for further set-up instructions.]

MOVEMENT 1

The Story Begins

from the Gospel of Matthew

[the song leader leads the people in humming the tune of "Amazing Grace" once and then the piano continues to softly and slowly play under the following words (pianists, please see instructions for underscoring in the "Tips for Preparation" document)]

Reader 1: On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and said, "Where do you want us to prepare for you to eat the Passover meal?" He replied, "Go into the city, to a certain man, and say, 'The teacher says, "My time is near. I'm going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.'" The disciples did just as Jesus instructed them. They prepared the Passover.

Facilitator: Let us prepare our tables. Please open the fabric bundle on your table and send one person to the center table to light your candle from the Christ candle here.

*[as the accompaniment to "Amazing Grace" continues, the candles are lit.
When all is set the music ends.]*

Reader 2: That evening he took his place at the table with the twelve disciples. As they were eating he said, "I assure you that one of you will betray me."

Deeply saddened, each one said to him, "I'm not the one, am I, Lord?" He replied, "The one who will betray me is the one who dips his hand with me into this bowl. The Human One goes to his death just as it is written about him. But how terrible it is for that person who betrays the Human One! It would have been better for him if he had never been

born.” Now Judas, who would betray him, replied, “It’s not me, is it, Rabbi?” Jesus answered, “You said it.”

“Amazing Grace” vs 1

**Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost but now am found
Was blind but now I see.**

The Call

Facilitator: Let us join in the Call.

Reader 3: When we have a problem,
Bring us to this table.

Reader 4: When we are hungry,
Bring us to this table.

Reader 5: When we have a disagreement,
Bring us to this table.

Reader 6: When we want to get some work done,
Bring us to this table.

Reader 7: When we want to worship in the Spirit of Christ,
Bring us to this table.

- *By William J. Everett*

[short 4 measure musical intro]

**'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
and grace my fears relieved;
how precious did that grace appear
the hour I first believed!**

Facilitator: The gathered Body of Christ, like those first disciples, breaks bread together no matter what. We don’t have to all be in agreement or have the same perspectives on everything in order to have a place at the table. Jesus knew as he gathered his loved ones around him that, despite their connection as chosen family, there was discord and difficulty. He knew that some would betray and some would deny him. And he knew there was certainly not one mind about how they should handle the circumstances they found themselves in that last week.

Each person sat around that table with their own fears,
their own experiences, their own doubts.

And Jesus also knew that even and especially in that kind of circumstance,
we need to share food that will sustain us for the road ahead.

[short 4 measure musical intro]

**Through many dangers, toils and snares
I have already come:
'tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
and grace will lead me home.**

Facilitator: We gather here today knowing that God provides unbounded grace and calls us to also be grace-full with each other. We can create safety for tender conversations by remembering that each one is precious in God's sight and each one of us is on a journey, though perhaps at different places along the road. Being grace-full with each other means providing a shield against judgment that can hurt. In our time today, we make a covenant to bind us together for good and not ill. I invite you to read the words to the Covenant there in your worship guide silently to yourselves.

[pause to allow this to happen...]

Covenant

We gather around the table acknowledging God's unbounded grace for all. We come from different backgrounds, cultures and ethnicities and we acknowledge our differences of opinion and perspectives on many matters. Yet we gather still, knowing that Jesus calls us to break bread and share the cup no matter what, and that each of us has a place here.

And so, as we gather around the table I commit to:

- 1) **Stay curious.** I come with a willingness to learn and commit to staying at the table. When the going gets rough, I will turn to wonder, ask questions and stay engaged.
- 2) **Be kind.** There will be statements shared at the table that will challenge my perspectives. I will be respectful in my responses and engagement, treating each one with grace and love.
- 3) **Listen with the same amount of passion with which I want to be heard.** In the words of St. Francis, I will seek to understand more than to be understood. I also commit to share the air and not dominate.

Facilitator: You have on the table a rock for everyone. I invite you to take up a rock and hold it in your hand—and if it helps to focus, close your eyes if you are comfortable doing so. Rocks can represent many things. They can be hurled in ways that hurt but they can also be stepping stones to help traverse difficult passages. Rocks are also hard and can represent the hard things we sometimes have to face—like a lump in the

throat or the stomach when we feel nervousness or fear. I invite you to feel the rock in your hand and contemplate what it might mean to *you* in this moment.

[pause for reflection... pianist plays another verse of Amazing Grace softly, slowly]

Facilitator: Now I invite you to place your stone on the copy of the Covenant in your Guide as a sign that whatever you are feeling is in a container of safety if we are grace-full with each other in this time. Let us together read aloud our Covenant.

[read the Covenant together, then sing]

**The Lord has promised good to me,
his word my hope secures;
he will my shield and portion be
as long as life endures.**

[piano continues to play softly as the Facilitator says and the people move:]

Facilitator: I invite you to stand as you are comfortable. Will one person from each table come and get bread wrapped in a napkin and a cup and take it back to their table?

[When the people are back at their tables, the music concludes]

Presider: The Lord be with you

People: And also with you

Lift up your hearts

We lift them up to the Lord

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God

It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Presider: It is right, and a good thing,
whenever we gather around tables,
to give thanks to you, Loving God.
For out of holy dust you formed us
and gave us breath and life.

You created us for relationship and yet
we turn away from it at times,
afraid of the things that seem to divide.
Turn us around, God, to see that we are your children,
we are beloved,
we are a part of you.

Throughout time, your love is steadfast,
delivering us from captivity,
and promising to always be our God.

And so, with all the saints gathered here and beyond,
we offer praise!

[to the tune of Amazing Grace]

**Praise God, praise God, praise God, praise God,
Your love is strong and true!
Blest is the One who comes to us.
Praise God, praise God, praise God!**

[The music may continue under the next part]

Presider: Holy are you, and blessed is your Son Jesus Christ.
Your Spirit anointed him
to preach good news to the poor,
to proclaim release to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
and to announce that the time had come
when you would save your people.
He healed the sick, fed the hungry, and ate with sinners.

Facilitator: Indeed, Jesus' ministry was focused on those who were suffering.
He touched those considered unclean. He healed those considered forever damaged.
He proclaimed a new day for those who felt they had no future.
Jesus ate with many people throughout his ministry
that the status quo of his day considered unworthy to share a table with him.
In this way, he showed us how to be in relationship.
He showed us how to be in ministry.

I invite you to take the Sharpie pen and write a word on your rock that represents what you hope the church will do for the least of this world. For instance, the word might be love, hope, feed, comfort... or any other word that is on your heart.

[music plays as this is done... when all have finished:]

Facilitator: Will you lift aloud the words you have written right from your seats, popcorn-style?

[music ends as the people lift aloud their words]

Presider: By the baptism of his suffering, death, and resurrection
you gave birth to your church which is called to be all these things we have lifted up.
These are the fruits by which we pray the church will be known.
Deliver us again and again from slavery to sin and the death of our own fear,
and make with us a new covenant
by water and the Spirit.

When the Lord Jesus ascended,
he promised to be with us always,
in the power of your Word and Holy Spirit.

Reader 8: While they were eating, Jesus took bread,
blessed it, broke it, and gave it to the disciples.

Presider: And then he said,
“Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you.
Do this in remembrance of me.”

Reader 9: Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them.

Presider: And then he said,
“Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant,
which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Facilitator: I invite two people at each table to lift the bread and the cup as we sing:

[to the tune of Amazing Grace, the Presider lifts the bread and cup at the center table]

**Come near, O God, and touch our hearts
through bread and cup this day.
Be with us now as you were then.
We open to your way.**

Presider: And so,
in remembrance of your mighty acts in Jesus Christ,
we offer ourselves as a holy and living sacrifice,
willing to do the work to create a church
that lives fully empowered to do good in the world,
in union with Christ’s offering for us.
Let us proclaim the mystery of faith, repeating after me:

Christ has died...
Christ has died
Christ is risen
Christ is risen
Christ will come again
Christ will come again

Please open your hands upward in a sign of willingness
to receive what the Spirit has in store for us today.

[music begins to play underneath, softly, slowly]

Pour out your Holy Spirit on us gathered here,

and on these gifts of bread and wine.
Make them be for us the body and blood of Christ,
so that we may be for the world the body of Christ,
redeemed by his blood.

By your Spirit make us one with Christ,
one with each other,
and one in ministry to all the world,
until Christ comes in final victory
and we feast at his heavenly banquet.

Through your Son Jesus Christ
with the Holy Spirit in your holy church,
all honor and glory is yours, almighty God,
now and forever!

[sung with strength]

**When we've been there ten thousand years,
bright shining as the sun,
we've no less days to sing God's praise
than when we first begun!**

Facilitator: Please join me, in your first language and with the name for God which speaks most powerfully to you, in the prayer that Jesus taught us, saying...
[Lord's Prayer]

Facilitator: I invite everyone to take a piece of bread, but do not yet eat it.
[pause to let this happen; when all have a piece, continue]

[as the Presider breaks a loaf at the middle table]

Presider: Because we are one Body and yet broken,
we eat of this bread that can sustain us as we offer our brokenness to Christ
and let Christ transform it.

[Presider lifts the cup]

Presider: Because God's grace is never-ending
and God's unceasing love is poured out for us,
we partake of this fruit of the vine and know a new connection in Christ.

Facilitator: I invite you to pass the cup around, holding it for your neighbor as they dip their bread and eat.

*[pianist plays "Fill My Cup, Lord" or other familiar communion hymn/song
as the people do this]*

Prayer After Receiving

Presider and People:

Join me in the Prayer after Receiving.
For this food which sustains us for our work,
we give you praise!
For this drink which quenches our thirst for grace,
we give you honor!
For this fellowship in the midst of hardship,
we give you thanks!

Facilitator: The scriptures say that after they finished their meal, they sang a hymn and went out to the Mount of Olives where Jesus would set himself apart and pray, knowing that hard times were ahead. My friends, I invite you to a moment of silence. You have shared the bread and cup with those at your table, and in spirit with all those in this room and the larger Body of Christ that we represent. Would you take a moment, in your own way, to offer a silent prayer for those who surround you, that we might all feel held in the embrace of the Christ who challenged his disciples to a deeper connection to God and to one another and invites us now to that same task.

Silent Prayer

[when enough time has passed, the piano comes back in with a verse of "Amazing Grace" and comes to a quiet conclusion]

Facilitator: Amen. You may be seated.

Kitchen Table Conversations

Facilitator: Jesus invites us to tables of conversation and relationship, whether that be the communion table or the kitchen table. At every table, we acknowledge the brokenness and grace present. We all come to conversations differently based on our different cultural experiences from an early age, especially those conversations where we might not all agree. What was it like around your "kitchen table?" In other words, in your upbringing, how was conversation and conflict handled? We have cultural expectations about whether and how we will deal with conflict. Further, we have familial subcultural patterns that affected our sense of whether it was safe or acceptable or right to address conflict and have difficult conversations.

[Give an example from your own experience here... for instance, when I led this ritual I talked about how fighting was something you "didn't do" in my family of origin so when tensions did arise and my parents split, the thought was formed in me the fear that all disagreement leads to the extreme of divorce... which of course is not always true, as I have learned through many hours of therapy and learning to embrace discomfort!]

If you are willing, would you offer a glimpse to those at your table of something having to do with these questions:

What was it like to deal with conflict in your family of origin?

How did you learn to deal (or not) with conflict?

How are you handling conflict in a similar or different way today?

Please keep your share to about 3 minutes so that everyone that wants to has a chance to speak. You will hear a chime at the end of every three minutes. This is your indication to wrap up your share and move to the next person. You *always* have the choice to “pass” if you are not ready to share. When everyone else has shared, if anyone who has passed now feels ready to share, you can go back to them. In this round, you are invited to simply listen with no verbal response except for the group to say “thank you” after each share.

[Facilitator keeps time and uses a small chime or bell to indicate a 3-minute mark until all persons have shared... (allow about 30 seconds before you start the timer again to give time for people to finish their share and the cup to be passed)]

Facilitator: Thank you for sharing something of yourself with others. This is a gift we give to one another that furthers understanding and empathy.

Did it feel like the words of the Covenant were respected?

Take a few minutes to reflect together about the sharing.

[use the chime/bell to bring people back after about 5 minutes]

MOVEMENT 2

The Conversation Continues

Facilitator: Today we will have an experience at table talk. Imagine this as a discussion around the dinner table. We are gathered to hear one another, in safety and love. We are exploring meaning, not a decision of who’s right or who’s wrong. My/our job as a facilitator is to make this conversation easy and meaningful. The purpose of this movement is to allow you to experience a conversation over a difficult topic with a group. Let us begin by reminding ourselves of our Covenant, reading the three points together:

Reminder of the Covenant

I commit to:

- 4) **Stay curious.** I come with a willingness to learn and commit to staying at the table. When the going gets rough, I will turn to wonder, ask questions and stay engaged.

- 5) **Be kind.** There will be statements shared at the table that will challenge my perspectives. I will be respectful in my responses and engagement, treating each one with grace and love.
- 6) **Listen with the same amount of passion with which I want to be heard.** In the words of St. Francis, I will seek to understand more than to be understood. I also commit to share the air and not dominate.

Please insert your own questions or prompts here that you will invite people to talk about. One of the things I loved about how this happened in our setting is that each person was given a beautiful little journal to write in as they came to the event. They were invited at the beginning of each time of sharing around their tables to take a few minutes of silent reflection/journaling on the prompt before launching into the group discussion. This was wonderful for allowing some time to settle, to give extroverts a time to think before speaking, and to give introverts the chance to get their thoughts going before the pressure of verbalizing.

[at the end of your set of discussion questions, continue...]

Take another few minutes of silence to reflect on this experience. Write in your journal. What happened with you? What changed or moved in the group? Where were moments of comfort or discomfort? What did this experience mean to you and to the group?

[take 3 minutes]

MEAL

[This experience involved actually eating a meal together at this point. If you are not allowing time for that, skip this part and move to Movement 3]

I hope that this approach to a facilitated conversation has deepened your connections with each other and given everyone an opportunity to share stories and perspectives about these questions. We are going to break now for [lunch/dinner] and a time to continue spending time together and getting to know each other better. Before we break...let's bless the food that we will be sharing. *[Offer a prayer and instructions for the meal as well as the timeframe for reconvening for Movement 3]*

MOVEMENT 3

Closing Ritual

[pianist begins to play "Amazing Grace" softly under the next words]

Facilitator: As we bring our time to a close, we return to Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Reader 10: Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, “I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me.” And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, “Abba, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me...”

Facilitator: We may feel very different things right now, perhaps hopeful, perhaps not. Even Jesus had a reckoning moment where he wished that the pain associated with disappointment, grief, fear and unknowing would pass from him. But he finished his sentence with, “yet not what I want but what you want.”

I invite you to hum the tune of “Amazing Grace” as we pass the cup around our table, a sign that both things can be true—we can feel like we want to leave the conversation and have the cup pass from our responsibility but we also know that we are not alone in this—that God is present and we hold this cup together.

[the cup is passed and the tune is hummed]

Reader 11: Then he came to the disciples and found them sleeping; and he said to Peter, “So, could you not stay awake with me one hour? Stay awake and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

Reader 12: Again he went away for the second time and prayed, “Abba, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.” Again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy. So leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words... “Abba, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.”

Facilitator: I invite you to take up the rock you wrote on and take it with you to make one large circle in this room *[pause for this to happen]*. Pass your rock once to your right *[pause for this to happen]*. This is a sign that we each sit, as the disciples were famous for talking about, “at the right hand” of each other, supporting one another not in spite of our differences, but because that’s what Christ did... sat and ate with especially those who were different. Take this rock home with you and place it somewhere as a reminder to continue to be in prayer for each other and for this church.

I invite you now to come close to the center table in a “clump” (not side by side). *[pause for this to happen]* What is “bubbling up” in your right now? What words or phrases or sentences would you want to lift up as learnings or discovery or wisdom from your table conversations that you would want to share for the good of the whole group?

[allow time for this to happen]

Facilitator: Let us pray:
Holy and Loving God,
our eyes are heavy and yet we hear your call to stay awake in these days.
Help us to stay and to pray.
We know that what feels like death
can indeed be a path to resurrection with Christ.
And all God's people said, "**Amen.**"

[sing with energy – people may not have their Participant Guides so you may need to read the words to this verse before you sing]

**Yea, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
and mortal life shall cease:
I shall possess, within the veil,
a life of joy and peace.**

Facilitator: Go in peace to set tables of love wherever you go.

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