

Honoring a Person's Story as Holy

"You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts." -2 Corinthians 3:2-3

As followers of Jesus, the stories of our lives are like a letter written from Jesus by the Holy Spirit on the hearts of the people who shaped and formed us. By sharing our story with other people whom the Spirit is using to influence us in our growth as followers of Jesus, we allow him to continue to write that story on the hearts of more and more people.

The moment when we hear another person's story is holy because their story is ultimately about Jesus and his work of grace in their life. It's also a great honor because the person is stepping out in faith and vulnerability, entrusting the group with personal information that is to be held in confidence. In fact, sharing our story is like a metaphorical "disrobing" in the middle of a room full of people. Learning how to respond to a person as they share their story is like "re-clothing" them with dignity after they have taken this relational risk, and thus, is a vital practice for a community centered around the gospel.

The following principles offer helpful guidance in responding in a way that honors the person, their story, and the God as the author of all of our stories. We highly recommend reading the following bullet points out loud every time someone is about to share their story in order to refocus ourselves to appropriately hear and respond to their story.

Before, During, & After Their Story

- Before they begin, we'll pray for them to have peace that God would communicate exactly what he wants through their story and for them to be reminded of his great love for them and that they would feel known, loved, accepted, seen, and heard.
- Hearing another person's story is an honor because they are trusting us with intimate information about what God has done in their life through their experiences, sufferings, and joys. Let's all remember that this is a holy moment since their story is ultimately about Jesus and his saving work in their life.
- What we're about to hear is to be held in complete confidence. We must all fight the temptation to fall into the sin of gossip, knowing that this fight will lead to building greater trust and intimacy among us.
- Pay attention to every word. Give positive non-verbal cues to demonstrate attentiveness like subtle nods of the head and consistent eye contact. Avoid distracting verbal cues like "oh, yeah"; "wow"; "really?"
- Prepare to respond after their story by thanking them for the honor of hearing it, and for trusting us enough to share it. Offer a reflection or two about specific parts of their story. Our responses serve as their "re-clothing," and will acknowledge both their suffering and joy. We want to model sympathy and compassion, engaging them at an emotional level by entering into their pleasures and pains with them.
- Healthy responses might sound like: "Hearing that scene of abuse in your story made me so sad for you as a little child"; "It's so clear to me that you are broken over your sin"; "I loved hearing how God so faithfully pursued you throughout different seasons of your life"; "I noticed the theme of abandonment over and over again, and that breaks my heart."
- We're all committing right now to avoid hijacking the response time by turning the focus to our experiences, our stories, or anything else that shifts the attention to ourselves. Additionally, our response time is not the best opportunity to offer advice, suggest resources, or ask follow up questions.
- However, in order to grow in our ability to speak the gospel to one another as a community, it can be helpful to ask this one follow-up question: "What truth about the gospel do you need to be reminded of most often?"
- We'll end the response time in prayer, addressing elements of their story and praying relevant truths of Scripture over them, encouraging them, and entrusting them to the ongoing care and shepherding of Jesus in their life. We'll also pray for the Father to protect them from spiritual attack. After a person brings their story into the light, it's not uncommon for them to experience attacks from Satan and his demons leading to doubt, shame, condemnation, fear, or depression. We want to pray specifically for their protection just as Jesus prayed in John 17:15 for the Father to "keep them from the evil one."
- Let's pause right now to put all technology on "Do Not Disturb" or remove it from the room entirely.