

Talking to Strangers

One of the great blessings in my marriage is this: *My wife knows how to mingle.* I just tag along. I'm not much a talker. As much as I've prayed for it, the Holy Spirit never anointed me with the gift of mingling. Perhaps something happened in my childhood or maybe it was that rule that I took too seriously: *Don't talk to strangers.* Darlene has never obeyed that rule and I couldn't be happier. At dinner parties or church fellowships, I'm happy to just smile, nod and let her practice her gift of conversation. She even successfully invited a salesman to visit our church when we attended his timeshare pitch. We didn't even have to buy a condo and he showed up at our church the following Sunday. She's talked her way out of *my* speeding tickets. 3 times! She turns on the tears and shares the reason I was speeding and the next thing I know we are given the tip of the hat and we're back on the road. I've never talked my way out anything. She's a pro.

I hate haircuts, and not because I long for a man-bun or to look like a member of Led Zeppelin. No. I hate it because I have to make a short list of things I to say to the gal who cuts my hair. After two or three universal topics like the weather, what I do for a living, who I am, I usually create about 10 minutes of awkward silence. I tip a little more than most because who can put a price tag on awkwardness.

My dad was a total extravert. He could *and would* talk to anybody. I remember days as a child watching him figure out a way to talk to everybody. He'd start with a joke. He'd have about ten in his holster. And then he would try to figure out if he was related to the stranger. I learned at a very young age that, in fact, we are somehow related to everyone in town. Even an exchange student from Japan.

For me, the polarities are striking. I don't have any trouble getting up and speaking at conferences or church services. No

problem there... It's a controlled environment. I plan what I'm going to say and no one talks back. At least not often. They stay in their seats and I stay on the platform. No problem. After it's over, it gets strange though. My impulse when I speak to people after the meeting is to begin a long screed of apologies.

"Sorry it took so long."

"I hope you could hear me."

"I don't think I said it the way I want to say it."

As parents and grandparents, we have to talk. The generations behind us need our words about the important things like defensive driving, the importance of a daily quiet time and the complete absurdity of the American League designated hitter. I think I do well at these talks especially about salvation and walking daily with Jesus. The difficult conversations about human sexuality are the ones I dread. I never felt qualified. I'd take my kids on a special trip and along the drive, I'd spill the beans on how everything works. For me, the strategy was perfect because I could keep my eyes of the road while I'm talking.

These days I am willing to embrace my introversion while seeking to be more daring in my interactions. In fact, yesterday, I even talked to the parking officer who happened to be placing a citation under my windshield wiper for parking in a no-parking zone. We had a wonderful conversation about our kids, the growth in our city, the power of random acts of kindness. We must have talked for 15 minutes. But he still gave me the parking ticket.