What's in the toolbox?

A Christian response to slights

Carol Penner

Ouch! I didn't say it out loud, but the church chairperson's words smarted. I concentrated on keeping my face neutral as the congregational meeting continued. I could feel my heart racing. I knew I would be unpacking his words later.

I don't even remember the exact question I was asked or my answer. It was something about how I saw my unique role in the congregation as a pastor. I had gone to the microphone to give my answer; the church chairperson stood up in response and, in a few short words, flatly contradicted me.

It was a brief interaction lasting less than thirty seconds, but what was said reverberated in my mind for a long time. *Why did he say that? Why am I so upset now? What is at stake for me? Is follow-up needed or not?*

Suffering a slight, publicly or privately, is a commonplace occurrence in the hurly-burly of life in the church, in our families, at work, or in the community. Words are said that take us aback and sting. Or sometimes it's words not said, credit not given, thanks not expressed. Or it's a dismissive gesture, a rolling of the eyes, a turning of the back, a shrug of the shoulders. We end up with our feelings crumpled and our spirit out of joint.

How do we deal with these small crises? There are so many tools in our theological toolbox to help us. I will share three stories and highlight some of the different tools I've used.

Pride and humility

How did I resolve what happened with the church chairperson? The framework that helped me at the time was pride and humility. That evening, as I was thinking about what happened, a comment I'd heard in a sermon came back to me. The preacher had said, "When our feelings are hurt, it is usually because of a blow to our pride. How might embracing humility help us release the hurt?"

The preacher's comment helped me in this situation, because my pride was feeling dented. I had a certain standing in the community as the pastor, and one of the things I felt I should know something about was my role in the congregation. When the church chair took the mic, he strongly disagreed with what I'd said: "That's not the pastor's role; that's what we're all supposed to do!" I felt taken down, and a shiver of incompetence went

down my spine. In my mind, I wondered, *Do I really know what I'm doing? Will my church members think less of me now?*

That the church chair had a valid point didn't salve my feelings. I wished he could have expressed himself in a more sensitive way. How much easier it would have been for me if he'd said, "I see where you are coming from, Carol, but I wonder whether . . ." Instead, his opinion came out blunt and unadorned. It was a small contradiction, but a public one. The comment was not a pattern; this church chair wasn't trying to undermine me or put me down. He was a plain-spoken person and wanted to set the record straight. Apart from a few comments like this, he was mostly supportive.

Wounded pride was at the centre of my pain. I had been served a helping of humble pie at the church meeting. It wasn't pleasant! But on reflection, it wasn't that bad; it wasn't going to kill me. I make mistakes, and everyone saw I'd made one. It was not that big a deal; my bruised pride would survive. As followers of Jesus, we are called to take a humble path, just as he did. He gave up so much and was treated so badly both by those he knew and those he didn't know well. Surely I could accept this small humbling moment with grace.

And what was the alternative for me? I could have doubled down on my pride and demanded an apology from the church chair, insisting that he not contradict me in public like that. Yet it was a small slight involving a choice of words. I felt that making a big deal of it would raise suspicions that I had a fragile ego. Confrontation would probably have bewildered a person who hadn't meant anything by his comment other than correcting a theological point. A better path was to humbly accept my pride being taken down a peg.

Yieldedness: Letting it go

Many years ago, my husband's widowed grandfather decided to remarry. The fact that he remarried a few short months after his wife's passing was difficult for his eight adult children. It wasn't made easier by the fact that he married someone the same age as his oldest children.

A few years passed, and the grandfather died without a will. His estate passed entirely to his new wife. This was disappointing for the eight children, who had hoped to inherit some money from their father's modest estate. But I never heard people bemoaning the fact that they didn't inherit any money; what I did hear was the story of the sugar bowl.

Once the grandfather was buried and the will was read and settled, one of my husband's aunts went to her father's widow with a request. "Our mother always had a pink sugar bowl on the kitchen table. I wonder whether you might be willing to part with that, as a memento for me of my mother." The widow was quick with her answer: "I know that sugar bowl, but I can't part with it. I really like it myself."

This interaction made a huge impression on my mother-in-law and everyone in that family. I heard the story at least half a dozen times from different people, but the gist was always the same: The person who had inherited everything was unwilling to share a crumb with her late husband's family.

Ten years later, twenty years later, I was still hearing the story of the sugar bowl! The bitterness was not fading away. The pain was present decades after the fact, and the family had broken off contact with the father's widow.

In early Anabaptism, the German word *gelassenheit* was used to describe the process of yielding to God's will. It's a word that is hard to translate, but it involves self-surrender and openness to suffering for God's sake. Its fruit is peace and calmness of mind. How might *gelassenheit* have helped in this situation? While sin is real (some people simply will not share), we do not have to let sin and hatred grow in us. Instead of allowing the pain of being denied a beloved object to fester, following Jesus would mean giving up the resentment and focusing on maintaining the relationship. We can forgive someone even if they don't offer an apology.

The catch here is that *gelassenheit* is so much easier from the outside. I wasn't attached to that sugar bowl, so it was easy for me to see where they'd gone wrong. When I've tried to practice *gelassenheit* about problems in my own life, it has been much more agonizing. I've found it remarkably difficult to let go of something that hurts me. A pebble in a shoe might only be the size of a lentil, but it can be excruciating. Can we aim for the spiritual lightness of *gelassenheit?* It can be practiced on hurts of every size.

Divine testing

I have been helping a particular individual in a long and sustained practical way over a period of years. In recent months, the person I have been helping said negative things about me to someone else, blaming me for something that had happened.

The framework of pride and humility can certainly help here. My pride was hurt because this person was saying negative things about me. I was worried that people would think less of me. Instead of getting praise and accolades for being a helpful friend, I was being cast as the villain. My pride was being taken down a peg. It was a humbling experience.

And the practice of yieldedness, of *gelassenheit*, was also a helpful tool. I needed to let go of the hurtful words. Holding on to them would build resentment. I needed help from God to surrender them and focus on working on the relationship.

Another tool turned out to be even more effective in this situation: the framework of seeing things as a test from God. Lately, I've been reading the spiritual classic *Introduction to the Devout Life* by Francis de Sales (first published in 1609). Francis de Sales, in fact, promotes the first two tools

"Great occasions for serving God come seldom, but little ones surround us daily." . . . If we are unable to be true to love under the pressure of small slights, we are bound to fail when facing greater temptations.

I've mentioned: humility and a yieldedness to God's will. He also teaches that God sends us challenges to help us practice obedience. The majority of trials are small things: "Great occasions for serving God come seldom, but little ones surround us daily."[1] He lists the little tests that are required of us: "the tiresome peculiarities of husband or wife, the broken glass, the loss of a ring, a handkerchief, a glove; the sneer of a neighbour."[2] All of these help build a Christian's strength to offer love.

When we want to build muscle, we need resistance. We'd like to pick up a twenty-five-pound weight with ease. Picking up a five-pound weight many times will condition our muscles for the larger challenge. If we are unable to be true to love under the pressure of small slights, we are bound to fail when facing greater temptations. God sends us trials to strengthen us.

I found it easy to love the person I was caring for when they were thankful for the help I was giving them and everything was going smoothly. But now it was time to see whether I could love them under duress. This purer, stronger love required more self-discipline. After a stripping away of the positive parts of the relationship, could I continue to be loving?

Wisdom and love

Some people reading this last story might think: Why can't you confront that person? Shouldn't they apologize for what they said? Why do you just have to absorb everything?

In this situation, I am helping a person of advanced years who has no family. I am walking with them as they require more care and, most recently, as they moved into a long-term care home. It's understandable that they wanted to try to find someone to blame for what was happening; it's stressful to get old and need help. They have enough on their plate right now. They never intended for me to hear those words, which were spoken to someone else; they just needed a place to vent. They have probably forgotten all about them. Unfortunately, in the small town where I live, things have a way of getting back to you.

---

1 Francis de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life* (1609), chap. 35, "We Must be Faithful in Things Great and Small," Christian Classics Ethereal Library, https://ccel.org/ccel/desales/devout_life/devout_life.v.xxxv.html.

2 de Sales, *Introduction to the Devout Life*, chap. 35.

I find that in the ups and downs of life, we can absorb bad behaviour. Not everything has to be confronted. A good friend or a family member can be having a bad day, a bad week, or a bad year, and because their circumstances are stressful, we decide this isn't the time to confront. Taking a humble path, letting things go, and trying to let the trial help us become a better person are tools that can aid us in dealing with small slights.

A good friend or a family member can be having a bad day, a bad week, or a bad year, and because their circumstances are stressful, we decide this isn't the time to confront. Taking a humble path, letting things go, and trying to let the trial help us become a better person are tools that can aid us in dealing with small slights.

There are other situations where it can be important to stand up for yourself and to ask for an apology. Patterns of behaviour that demean or put down consistently shouldn't be ignored. Microaggressions can be part of a pattern that one faces because of race, gender, disability, or sexual orientation. There are other tools you need for those types of hurts. We pray for wisdom to know which tools to use and when.

God provides many tools for us. We learn from scripture, from wise guides, and from our reading. Each of the tools I've mentioned today fit within the larger context of love. When we love God, small slights can be put in perspective. Knowing we are loved and valued by God allows us to take a humble path, like Jesus. Letting go of resentment is made possible when our eyes are fixed on God's great love for us. We can rejoice when opportunities come to test our love, because the Holy Spirit is working within us to make us stronger.

Finally, the reality is that we are just as likely to be the one causing the offense. We hope that when we have a bad day and are not our best selves, those around us continue to love us and give us grace: "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31, NRSVue).

God of grace,
it's not always smooth sailing
on our journeys of love.
You know the bumps that jolt us
and despite our best intentions,
we find resentment blowing us off course.
As we lie down to sleep,

we toss and turn with questions:
"Why did they say that to us?
What are people thinking about me?
This isn't fair!"
Place your hand on our foreheads
and whisper sweet words of love.
Let these words sink into us like ballast,
giving us the grace we need
for the passage home. Amen.

About the author

Carol Penner teaches practical theology and serves as chaplain at Conrad Grebel University College in Waterloo, Ontario. She has a blog of worship resources at leadinginworship.com.