

“Let’s Talk About…” is a column in our monthly newsletter where we will learn one thing at a time about how we can love others the way they want to be loved. We will learn something each month that helps us understand and respect people who are different from us a little more deeply.

Let’s Talk About Christianese

Have you ever noticed we have insider language in church? Different churches have different “dialects.” Some want everybody to know the date when they were ‘born again’ or ‘saved;’ others care more about the date one was baptized; a whole lot of us have something to say about a very specific thing called Communion or Eucharist, and to the unfamiliar it may sound like we’re practicing cannibalism in that sacrament! So today, let’s talk about language, and let’s look at words people may hear as “Christianese.”

“Sin” is not a word that gets used outside of particular religious contexts. “Salvation” is not a universally-accepted need for people. “Discipleship” outside of church might mean something similar to apprenticeship, but the Christian meaning is lost on people who aren’t immersed in this language. One that really caught me off guard last summer is that not everybody believes people have souls. What’s more, the term “spirituality” is still too church-y for many people that I once may have described as “spiritual but not religious.”

So this is all interesting, but what can we do about it? Should we just stop talking about core components of our faith? Certainly not! Sin and salvation are vital to understanding the Christian message (although what exactly those things entail will vary in different traditions) and spiritual practices are necessary for Christian discipleship. And, what’s important about all these things is *not* the special language we use to talk about them. Jesus’ transformative gift to the world matters; calling it by any particular name is a far lower priority than people actually experiencing it.

What can be challenging is when the words that bother someone are words we hold dear. For me, hearing my friend share that “spirituality” wasn’t a workable concept for them left me dumbfounded and at a loss for words. I had never considered that people might feel that way about that word because for me, it was freeing and inspiring! Thankfully, we weren’t the only two people in that conversation. Someone else chimed in that they think about connecting to the universe, another shared how they’d adjusted the 12 steps language of “higher power” to talk about their “highest self,” and another person suggested thinking of their “favorite self.” It took a while, but we found that we could have common ground in talking about what I’d usually call spiritual practices as self/soul care.

Maybe spirituality isn’t the word that’ll rock your world, but when we are committed to loving all our neighbors, sooner or later one of them is going to catch us totally off guard with the way they talk about God, the world, and their own journey. When that happens, choose to listen. Ask curious questions; I’d compare it to learning about a fictional world (and just remember it’s this person’s real world!) Look for the shared values, challenges, and commitments. If you stay in the conversation, it may open up a whole new possibility for making our world a more loving and just place for all people.

Our “Let’s Talk About…” column is one place where we can help one another learn how to be better allies for all our neighbors. If you have a question you’d like answered, or if there are things you wish others in our congregation better understood about your own marginalized identities or those for whom you are already a strong ally, please submit suggestions to <https://forms.gle/E9eRqZJGLgVagbDZ9> or email me directly at virginiag@smokyhillumc.org.