

Every once in a while - perhaps more often than I know - I'll say or do something that gets interpreted in ways that I didn't intend. I suspect this happens to all of us. Our words or actions are perceived as something quite different than what we'd hoped or in ways we never thought they would be perceived. Often when that happens, the other person feels hurt or offended by us. Then, the one who has felt that hurt or offence often reacts and their defensiveness can hurt or offend us in return. These moments or these kinds of interactions can lead to deep and lasting conflict if we slide into patterns of defensiveness and hurt. Even the most intimate relationships can be deeply damaged by unintended messages. We're going to reflect on this for a brief time today on the Covenant Weekly Podcast Season 2 Episode 14.

### Theme Music

We live in a world that seems to thrive on reacting. We hear something we don't like, we disagree with, or that makes us uncomfortable and we push back - often in ways that are demeaning to the other. Sometimes this pushback is triggered by the very slightest thing. The term "snowflake" has come to describe someone who has a meltdown at the very lightest touch. And there are some who seem to be looking for a reason to take offence. On the flip side are those who feel they should be able to say and do whatever they want and everyone else should just deal with it. Those who seem to be intentional offenders will coopt the term "snowflake" and use it to describe *anyone* who is offended by their words, actions, or ideas.

In our culture where reacting seems so commonplace, it is very easy to feel hurt or offended. We often tend to adopt the cultural norms around us even if we might admit they don't make things better. It also becomes very easy to become dismissive of those who express hurt or offence at something we have said or done. Rather than listening, we disregard them or even tell them how wrong they are for being hurt or offended.

In the spirit of James 1:19, I've been thinking specifically about things we habitually say or do within churches (within Covenant) that may send a message that is not what we intend.

I should say that a part of what has got me thinking about this are positive examples of awareness that some Covenant people have shown in recent weeks. One specific situation took place on the second Sunday of advent when we introduced our Christmas tree with craft paper ornaments. We were preparing to invite people to come to the front and decorate a paper and hang it on the tree. I thought everything was set, but when we talked about how the service was going to run, Nancy Vincent asked simply, "What about people who can't make it up the stairs?" She was thinking about something that I'd neglected. Had we invited everyone to participate, but not taken into consideration the physical challenge of three steps, what unintended message may we have sent to those who wanted to participate, but couldn't?

Our solution may not have been ideal, we had Brent prepared to put things on the tree on behalf of people who couldn't access it, but we *hope* it sent the message that we *did* (Nancy did) think about and care about those with physical limitations. But we don't always. And some of what we say, even with the best of intentions, may leave unintended messages.

On the issue of accessibility, our facility may send an unintended message. Our wheelchair ramp is steep, narrow, and slippery when wet. Our front door has no push-to-open button. And when Kayleigh (if you haven't met Kayleigh yet, you really need to...she's amazing!) was going downstairs for the kids' program on Sunday in her wheelchair she had to be wheeled outside, down the questionable ramp, across the front of the building, down the steep side ramp and into a door with a small step to overcome to get in. We *say* we want everyone to be welcome at Covenant. We *believe* that we want everyone to be welcome at Covenant. But I wonder if our building sends an unintended message that we don't *really* want everyone to be welcome at Covenant.

On a related issue...when those of us who are music leaders tell everyone to stand for the singing what unintended message might it send to those who are unable to stand?

Something happened this past Sunday that left me wondering what message we've been sending with our online services. When I mentioned the blessing we've had that we haven't had to replace the carpet in the time we've had the building, Glenn posted a thank you to Carmen for the great job she has done in

taking care of our carpet. That was a great comment! Unfortunately, I didn't see it until after and most other people didn't see it at all. Now, I know Glenn and don't feel like he is offended by his comment not being shared more broadly. But it has got me thinking about how well we engage with people online as actual participants in our gathering and not just observers of something happening. Is there an unintended message that comes about because the people leading aren't aware of the comments being made? I don't have a lot of clarity about how we can overcome this potentially unintended message so far, but it seems the first step is being open to an awareness of it.

What are some other things we say or do within a church context that might be sending unintended messages? Feel free to share them with me at [jon@covenantchurch.ca](mailto:jon@covenantchurch.ca) and let's start a conversation about how we could correct them.

And I invite you to think about this in other contexts of your life as well. Are you open to the idea that sometimes you may be sending unintended messages? Will you be willing to listen and consider someone else's perspective rather than just defending what you said or did? And when you're offended or hurt, might you be willing to consider that what led to that offence was unintended and respond with grace and attempts at clarification?

It's possible for some of us, depending on how we're wired, for this kind of self-reflection to slide into deep worry or anxiety about how others might respond. If that is your tendency, you're probably already doing this so you can likely rest easy. Perhaps you need this closing reminder, though.

This is an area where we will never be perfect and that's okay because perfection isn't the goal. Love is the goal. Even if we do speak with love and clarity others may still *feel* offence where it wasn't intended. And when we seek clarity with others, we may find that they are very open to intentionally causing offence or hurt. Thinking carefully about our words and actions won't fix everything and apologizing quickly when we've offended without intention won't erase wounds. But perhaps these things can move us a notch in the direction of love and living out the peace of Christ.

*Transition Music*

This week our Men's Connection and our Women's Bible study are resuming on Tuesday at 10 am and Wednesday at 10 am respectively.

On Wednesday evening our youth are not meeting, but we are inviting our Covenant family to participate in a special time of prayer for our youth. Our youth leaders will be gathering at 6 pm to pray for our students. They are inviting you to join them from wherever you are and take *some* time - as little or as much as you are able - between 6 and 8:30 to join them in prayer for the students, their families, our leaders, and the programs this winter and spring. We are honoured to be able to share Jesus with a fairly large group of students. Some are from families who are connected to a church - Covenant or otherwise. Many of the students are from families who have no church connection and Covenant youth is one of the few places they have to hear about Jesus and that God loves them. Our youth leaders are grateful for your support and welcome you to be praying alongside them this Wednesday from wherever you are.

I should take this moment to say, if you wanted to get involved as a youth leader, Brent and his team would be more than glad to talk with you about what is involved and how you could make a beautiful kingdom difference in the lives of young people in our community as a youth leader.

As you go this week, may you go with the prayer in Psalm 19:14:

*May the words of my mouth  
and the meditation of my heart  
be pleasing to you,  
O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.*

Go in Peace.

*Theme Music*