



## **Rector's Essay**

By The Rev. Jarrett Kerbel (12/12/25)

My advisor for my Master's Thesis, Christopher Morse, gave me clear guidelines before I started writing. Chris said, "You need to present every side of the argument fairly and completely in a way that proponents of that position would support." He even gave me a format to follow that required me to argue all sides in full before moving on to my conclusion.

Fairly stating or describing a position we may disagree with seems to be a lost art. In part, we rarely take the time required to have a fulsome conversation about differences. I also wonder if we have lost faith in the idea that people can understand one another across significant disagreements. We are well trained in talking points and sound-bites. We are not very well trained in civil discourse.

A few essays ago, I described the GIVE skill; Generous/Gentle, Inquisitive, Validating and Easy Going/Encouraging. The GIVE skill is an easily remembered guideline for conversations that develop trusting relationships.

Today, as promised, I will share with you the FAST skill; Fair, Apologize (less), Stand on Your Values and tell the Truth as you see it. The goal of the FAST skill is to guide disagreements in such a way that we feel respect for ourselves and the other person when we are done talking. Our Baptismal Vows call us to "Respect the dignity of every human being" and the mission of the church is to "reconcile all people to God through Christ and to each other." How we relate to each other matters immensely.

"Fair" is how I started this essay. We need to have a real interest in fully understanding the person we are talking to. As we take turns sharing our positions, it is important to give a person time to fully spell out their thoughts. As a rule, I like to repeat back to a person their position after they are done and ask if I heard them correctly. They may say yes or they may want to clarify some points. Only when I feel like I have a fair grasp of my interlocutor will I go on to my point of view.

“Apologize (less)” may seem very strange as a conversational guideline. For me, as a shame-based human, I need this guideline to restrain my tendency to use “sorry” as a way to avoid facing the facts of what is happening. Many of us have learned to deploy “sorry” as a preemptive admission of responsibility to stave off blame. In general, too much “sorry” points to an unsafe emotional atmosphere that needs to be addressed.

“Stand on your values.” What you care most deeply about is crucial for a robust and constructive conversation. I much prefer a substantial conversation where values are expressed outright then one where we rush to compromise too soon. I want chunky conversations! Much more nutritious.

“Tell the Truth as you see it.” We need to hear from all perspectives and we should not be shy about the notion of truth. On one level, we are just talking about honesty. On another, we are claiming that our perceptions matter on the pathway to agreement. “The truth as I know it is” both humble and bold. Humble in that we name the limits of our perception, bold in that we hold on to the idea that our accurate and tested perceptions carry authority. As much as we like to relativize truth for the sake of getting along - which is not a bad goal by any means - we all actually operate daily orienting our lives toward what we hold as true. Let’s just be straightforward about it!