

20 September 2009
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Proverbs 3:10-31
James 3:13 -4:3, 7-8a

Psalms 1
Mark 9:30-37

(Joined in progress)

...early this morning while it was still dark, weaving linens, I talked it over with my serving girls and they said, nah, go for the Gospel.

So here we are: I'm going to talk about the Gospel and I ain't touching that thing from Proverbs. Except to say that Red is probably the closest one in this congregation to having one of those wives.

Jesus is having communication problems today. He's walking with the disciples and he's trying to kind of go undercover a little bit because he wants some focused time alone with them to do this very difficult teaching about his death. So he doesn't tell people where he's going and he gets the disciples around him and he's trying to tell them and they don't understand. So that's one problem: They don't understand.

But problem two is even worse than problem one because they're not willing to tell him they don't understand. They're afraid to tell him, so communication is broken down.

Not only that, they're completely distracted by something else. And he hears them chattering away, quietly muttering away, quietly amongst themselves. They're worried about which one of them is the greatest. Now you know you could imagine Peter saying, "I'm the greatest," and John going, "No, I'm the greatest." But that's probably not what it was.

It was probably more like this: "You're the greatest, John."

"Oh, no, no, no, no, not me, Peter. You are the greatest."

"Oh, no, no, no..."

They were talking about what it means to be a great disciple and which one of them, you know, was most exemplary or something like that. And when Jesus asks them what they're talking about we have another communication breakdown. They won't say. Well, and why would they, you know? How embarrassing.

They know this isn't what was on Jesus' mind. They weren't listening to what was on Jesus' mind but they know this isn't it. So we've got complete communication breakdown.

And Jesus does something very interesting in light of this. What he doesn't do (what I would probably do) is say, "I know what you guys were talking about and I wish you'd pay attention to me and this is my concern and this is what's wrong with your thinking and nah, nah, nah..." You know? I would have just, you know, told the cow—what's the line? How the cow eats cabbage. I'd [have] just told them.

But Jesus is really interested in changing the dynamic of the conversation. He gets it, that this is going nowhere. That they're not ready for his agenda. They're not ready to hear what he has to say. They're preoccupied with something else. And he also knows that if he goes directly to what they're talking about and confronts them, it's going to get the shame response. It already has; they're not willing to talk to him. They're so wrapped up in either their pride or their shame they're unable to really face him.

So he does something creative and in this I think he is a communications master. He goes sideways and grabs a child and brings the child into their midst. It's something worth imagining. Not metaphorically—he really does it. And he says, "Okay. You guys want to understand the Kingdom? You want to understand to what it means to be deeply in the middle of the life God? You want to know how that important stuff takes place? You want to be good disciples? You want to be great disciples? You want to be the greatest disciple? This is how you do it..." And then he wraps his arms around this little one.

I think many of us are aware that in Biblical times children were valued even less than they are in our time. That it was understood that children were not entirely human. They weren't cooked yet. And they were liable to die. And for the sense of order, they had a purpose but their purpose was to grow up and be useful. And in the meantime we had to kind of nurture them to some degree but you know in pagan culture if you didn't want your kid you could leave your kid out on the doorstep, no problem. You had the right to do that. Children were possessions.

So Jesus takes this little one and says, "You've got to be like this. This is how you get it. This is how you get there. This is how you achieve high status in the Kingdom of God." And the image I have is of the disciples standing around in a circle and Jesus in the center and this child in his arms.

This is the model for communication. This is the model for being Church. For being Christ's disciples. Placing the one who has no status and no claims on anyone in the middle and giving our attention to that one in the middle who is being loved by Christ. And furthermore Jesus says, "If you want to be important, you have to be this one. You have to be this one who sheds all their claims to importance and rests here in my arms. Find your value in nothing else, in nothing else except the reality that I love you and you are mine and you are my child."

The metaphor goes even farther because then Jesus says something more. He says, "If you welcome this child, if you welcome this one in your center, you're welcoming me and not just me but the one who sent me, the one who made everything, the one from

whom all our reality emanates.” The whole thing, the whole works is caught up in that humility and openness and vulnerability and the people of God, being the people of God is about making that circle and keeping that circle. And sometimes being in the center.

But when we are in the center we are in the center as children of God. Not as important people with degrees or ordinations or status but just like everybody else on the same basis: Important because we are loved. And because we rest in that grace, that gives us authority. That is where authority comes from. Jesus says: That’s where my authority comes from. I am the child. I am directly connected to the love of God. That’s where my authority comes from, period.

So we’re thinking about communication and we passed out that survey and we got some responses. Thank you very much to all of you who did respond. It was in the Grapevine and it was in the pews for a couple of Sundays and it was in the hallway so I hope you got a chance to at least look at it.

We asked some questions and the answers to the questions were pretty interesting. One of the questions we asked was: What does the wider community at large, you know, Kelso/Longview/Rainier all around, what do they need to know about Saint Stephen’s Church? And the communications team consciously, intentionally wrote that as an open-ended question but I’ve got to say that in my little pea-brain it was an open-ended question but I did expect certain kinds of answers. I thought people would come back and say, ‘Oh, the children’s choir.’ Or ‘Wednesday night program.’ Or that kind of stuff. And they did—some people did respond that way.

Some people—actually the preponderance of people who bothered to fill that out—said what people need to know about us is not what we do or what programs we offer but who we are. And some of the things they talked about in terms of who we are—one of the words that came up very prominently was *welcoming* of all. Welcoming of all. Does that ring a bell?

What did Jesus say today? “If you welcome a child in my name you have welcomed me. If you welcome me you have welcomed the one who sent me.” This is the mission. This is the method. This is the message. It’s all of a piece.

The way we are is what the world needs now. Or the way we are when we’re at our best, I should say, because heaven knows we aren’t always there—we’re the disciples, after all. You know, if the apostles couldn’t get it right all the time, neither can we. But what we’re supposed to be anyway is what the world needs.

I mean, look at the way people treat each other. Look at the way we talk about each other. Look at the way we interrupt each other and insult each other and we get on our high horses and wag our fingers at each other and call that communication.

The world doesn't need people to cover up their disagreements and make nice. But the world doesn't need all that war every time there's a matter of substance we have to focus on together.

The world needs that circle focused on Christ and the value of each individual in Christ. The world needs that welcome and that substantial communication that respects one another. If all we did was be that kind of community, we would be accomplishing our mission.

I'm going to share ten commandments with you. This is from Grounded in God, Listening Hearts Discernment. This is what the vestry reads every time they gather. I don't say this is what the vestry does when they gather but it certainly is the vestry's heartfelt intention to live this way. These are our guidelines that we read like AA. We send them around the room because we need to keep reminding ourselves about how this thing works - and this is how it works:

1. Take time to become settled in God's presence. Hard to do very much when you are settled in God's presence.
2. Listen to others with you entire self: Senses, feeling, intuition, imagination and rational faculties. Goodness! You mean actually listen to what the other person has to say?
3. My favorite: Do not interrupt. My favorite because I have to work on it so hard.
4. Pause between speakers to absorb what is being said.
5. Do not formulate what you want to say while someone else is speaking.
6. Speak for yourself only expressing your own thoughts and feelings referring to your own experiences. Avoid being hypothetical. Stay away from broad generalizations.
7. Do not challenge what others say. Notice it doesn't say you must agree with what others say. You don't have to agree but don't challenge.
8. Listen to the group as a whole - to those who have not spoken aloud as well as to those who have.
9. Generally leave space for anyone who may want to speak a first time before speaking a second time yourself. Or third time or fourth...
10. This is the big one—if this was Dave [Letterman] we'd have a drum roll:

Hold your desires and opinions, even your convictions, lightly.

To be a child at the center of the circle means to say, your convictions, your voice, what you have to say is terribly important but it isn't the only thing that needs to be said. It isn't the only piece of information others need to hear. And you must have that childlike humility to say, 'I only have a piece of this puzzle.' That's what it means to hold your convictions lightly. Not to be a wimp but to have the humility to know that others might have something important to say.

The epistle says, 'But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruit without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy and a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.' May we be that circle with Christ at our center. May we be those children who are vulnerable to one another out of a deep trust in God to care for us. May we be the ones who welcome all in Christ's name and may this communication be the substance of our communion, our life in God together.

Amen.