

Luke 4:14-21

1/28/2007

The Rev. Bradley C. Dyche

In my last position, I taught a confirmation class annually. There, students were confirmed during their 9th grade year of school. Because of St. A's new system in which there is Sunday school through 8th Grade, fair warning, we will probably be moving to a similar confirmation process. The confirmation class that I taught, though, was not an easy one. In fact, I made it my determination to try and talk students out of Confirmation. Confirmation, after all is defined, as a *mature* affirmation of faith. If someone, even a ninth grader, cannot withstand a challenge to his or her faith from someone who really wants that faith to exist, then odds are, a *mature* commitment is not possible.

The class I taught consisted of 20 sessions and culminated in a final exam, again for the foundational knowledge. But they could take the exam as many times as needed. Some students did not like my zeal and requirements, as you might imagine, though none as much a confirmand I will call Steve. Steve was not exactly committed to the Confirmation Process. His parents wanted him to be confirmed, but they also were not committed to the process, and in my several years there, I had never met them in the parish. Steve missed most of the classes. He had valid excuses, namely soccer. And I attempted to work around his conflicts. That was nothing new. But Steve still did not want to take the class seriously. When the time for the final exam came, I was not surprised when he failed. Now, I have had students fail and take the exam again. There was no shame in that, but never have I had a student who so obviously did not care. In response to the question, "What are the two parts of the Bible," Steve answered "The Front and the Back" instead of the Old and New Testaments. When asked about the Father's attitude toward the younger son in Jesus' Parable of the Prodigal Son, Steve said that the Father told the second son that he wasn't good enough and to go away. Steve also wrote that the person whom God told to leave behind his land and be an ancestor of a great new nation with a wife named Sarah was not Abraham, but Jesus. Jesus was the answer to any questions he did not know. But the best was this: the German monk who led the sixteenth century movement against his perceived corruptions in the Roman Church was not Martin Luther but Johnny Walker, of liquor fame. This was not the foundation for a mature decision.

I calmly said, "Well, I'm sorry Steve, we'll have to do this exam again. Call me when you think you are ready." The next morning, though, I instead got a call from Steve's Father. The Father was extremely upset. How dare I fail his child? What sort of message was I sending about the love of God? I tried to explain: "Confirmation is separate from a Confirmation Class, and confirmation isn't about the love of God so much as about our response to that love. The class was reminded of this right before taking the exam." I added, "And what sort of message are we sending when we do not need to be intelligent in our faith or even spend time studying, especially with the fundamentalisms of our world?" I offered new classes and private sessions. The parent said that the student did not have time to retake the test, and furthermore, Steve would not be confirmed. The Father could not see that I was trying to do Steve a favor; I was trying to actually teach him. The Father could also not see that we were ideally hoping for the same thing: For

Steve to grow up and make mature decisions. For some reason we could not communicate and find common ground. For years, people would come up to me and tell me how Steve's parents had been at a party and belittled me for the gathered "Christian" group.

What I would like to talk about today is communication. What makes communication work? What makes it fail and misfire as it did with me and Steve's Father? And what does this have to do with our faith? Bearing in mind the conflict between me and Steven's parents, and perhaps conflicts that you personally have had, I want to reflect upon communication and Christ. After all, communication is the foundation for culture, an economy, and community. And today is our annual meeting, all about our community. Communication is therefore an especially relevant topic for us today. In today's reading from Paul's First letter to the Corinthians, we get to the heart of Christian Communication and how we should approach one another. It is a passage that is greatly, I believe, misunderstood. In it, Paul writes about speaking in tongues in church. He says, "I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you; nevertheless, in church I would rather speak five words with my mind, in order to instruct others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue. Brothers and sisters, do not be children in your thinking; rather, be infants in evil, but in thinking be adults."

Of course, without unpacking these words, it seems like Paul is communicating nothing. But an explanation might lie in what he means by the phrase, "Speaking in tongues". After all, speaking in tongues could refer to a whole host of things. It could refer to an activity that scares me personally: namely, something we might see in a Pentecostal Church in which people incoherently babble, while an appointed "Interpreter" insists that the babbling is a code from the Holy Spirit with a direct message that only the interpreter can discern. The interpreter therefore has great deal of power. This practice has its roots, not in Christianity, I would argue but in the pagan Oracle at Delphi where the oracle spoke in tongues with an interpreter. Speaking in tongues, though, can also refer to missionaries who are able to speak in the different languages of the lands that they travel to; being bilingual would be a variety of this speaking in tongues. This form of speaking would be extremely beneficial to early Christians as the movement spread. Paul, here, though, does not seem to be speaking about either of these versions of "speaking in tongues."

True, his words could potentially allude to either variety of speaking in tongues. Many theologians have made arguments for either the interpreted variety or the "Missionary position." But I want to propose that something else is happening here. Paul is using a pun. Paul is referring to the old versions of speaking in tongues but he is twisting it to a new meaning. Paul, I believe, is talking about the redemption of language. If communication is the foundation of our culture, and our culture has veered away from God, something in our communication must be transformed and redeemed, for us to re-focus on God. In this sense, speaking in tongues is something that might be difficult to understand, because such a way of communicating might not make sense to some, like the Pentecostals. And it might be like speaking another language, because it is a new language, one founded in love. But ultimately, neither of the other definitions fully address what I believe Paul is explaining. I think that Paul is more accurately saying, "I thank God that I can speak the language of God's love... And I think God for being able to speak that more than babbling on unintelligibly. Do not use language as a child, like babbling, but use

your minds and your hearts and communicate in the new language of God.’

But what is the language of God? Well, if the source of our redemption is Jesus, then we must go to Jesus to learn about this redemption of language. And the life of Jesus does show us how to communicate. In today’s Gospel we hear how Jesus passes through a violent mob unscathed and unvengeful. And we see how to communicate in the events that today’s Gospel foreshadows: the crucifixion. There, Jesus meets the pain, rivalry, and conflict of the world with forgiveness and peace, instead, as a way of undoing that violence and conflict, and rivalry. Jesus has no need to be resentful or envious. He does not need to grab for power or become defensive, even in the face of his own death. He knows that the truth will rise out of the unredeemed language of violence. In this very moment, we see how to communicate in Christ. Instead of the talking, rivalrous heads on our televisions at opposite ends of the spectrum, Jesus find a middle, a third way. Jesus walks into our hearts, families, and lives and invites us, with our language, to not be engaged in defensiveness and rivalry, and to trust that God will redeem even what we cannot.

As many have claimed, words are very powerful. And speaking in tongues is very powerful. It is a new language of peace: a way of interacting with one another that pays attention to the needs of others, pays attention to our own needs, and maintains integrity without rivalry or insult. As we think about how we want our church to be at this annual meeting. As we think about the state of our Union and our world, what would it be like if we all communicated with the language of Grace? If we did, there would be no further invitation to destructive conflict, violence and war. Our world’s redemption, therefore, involves every word we speak and how we speak them. So being wise in our words, taking the time it requires to be wise, and speaking in a way that avoids old rivalries is our path to healing our world and our relationships. Every word counts.