

Sermon Christmas Day III Year A

[RCL] Isaiah 52:7-10; Hebrews 1:1-4, (5-12); John 1:1-14; Psalm 98

Here's How Much I Love You

In the movie "Cool Hand Luke," Paul Newman plays Luke, a prisoner in a Florida prison camp, who refuses to conform to prison life. In a famous scene, Luke tries to escape, but he is caught and dragged back in shackles and brought to the captain of the prison. In order to make a lesson of him, the captain berates him in front of the other prisoners. When Luke makes a wise remark, the captain lashes out at him and utters the famous line: "What we've got here is a failure to communicate."

What we've got here is a failure to communicate.

It's a great line. It's also what makes the stuff of both great comedy and tragedy. Remember the comedy routine by Abbott and Costello called "Who's on First?" Abbott is trying to help Costello out by telling him the names of the players on a mythical baseball team. The lineup is: "who's on first, what's on second, I don't know is on third." It's all very funny, and it's all based on a failure to communicate.

It is also the stuff of great tragedy. Remember the end of Romeo and Juliet? They both end up taking their own lives. And why does this happen? You've got it. A failure to communicate. If only Juliet could have texted Romeo rather than relying on a messenger to let him know the plan about taking the potion that made her only appear to be dead, then everything would have worked out. But, alas, it was not so, and never was there a story of more woe than this of Juliet and her Romeo. And it was all because there was a failure to communicate.

In our own lives, we know all too well the reality and pain of failing to communicate. One of the leading causes of marriages falling apart is lack of communication. People say, we just drifted apart. We don't talk anymore. We are leading separate lives. You've all probably heard of "the silent treatment." It's one of the cruelest things human beings can do to each other. Failure to communicate can cause chasms to open up between us or it can intentionally wound others in the cruelest of ways.

In our collective lives, we also know the pain of failing to communicate. I've heard people say that a crowded city is paradoxically one of the loneliest places to live. People don't know the next door neighbors. People don't talk to each other on elevators. The difference between being part of a crowd and part of a community is the ability or the failure to communicate. If you communicate with your neighbor, you belong to a community. If you fail to communicate with your neighbor, you're just part of a crowd, a lonely crowd.

On the other hand, we all know what a blessing it can be when we really communicate with someone.

When we really connect with people we say things like, we had a heart-to-heart talk.

In a *Reader's Digest* story, Maureen Macay gives a lovely example of a grace she experienced while traveling in China. She writes, "Traveling by train in China, my son and I shared a sleeping compartment with a Chinese couple. They spoke no English and we knew few Chinese words, so conversation was impossible — until an hour into the trip, when the man called someone on his cell phone. After a few moments, he passed the phone to his wife who also spoke into it. Then, to my surprise, she handed me the phone. Feeling rather foolish, I said, 'Hello' into it. The person at the other end was the couple's daughter, who spoke perfect English. I told her about us and our trip, and she relayed the information to her parents. How delightful that a simple phone call could teach us such a lesson about Chinese graciousness." And the ability to communicate.

God knows about the struggle to communicate. Our Bible is the story of God's struggle to get God's message of love across to humanity. God tried over and over again, to reach us, but we kept turning deaf ears to God's message of love. We ignored commandments, prophets, and sages, invitations, threats, and promises.

What is the opposite of a failure to communicate? Saying exactly the right thing.

The message of Christmas is this: God found a new way to say exactly the right thing. The letter to the Hebrews says, "Long ago, God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days, he has spoken to us by a Son" (Hebrews 1:1-2).

A baby. The Son of God, the Word, co-eternal with God from before all time, became incarnate, took on flesh, real flesh, a baby's flesh. God became one of us, and like us, came into the world as a baby. The one at whose "command all things came to be: the vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, the planets, in their courses, and this fragile earth, our island home"¹ became for us an inarticulate infant.

In the words of today's psalm, God "sends out his commands to the earth, and his word runs very swiftly." At Christmas, God chose to let his Word have to learn to crawl first. The one whose "Let there be light," rang throughout the darkness and set off the spark of creation, became for us a speechless baby, limited to communicating through cooing and crying.

The one used to the praise of countless throngs of angels, singing their unending hymn, "Holy, holy, holy," surrounded himself with new music: a mother's "hush, sweet baby, hush," the ahing and oohing of shepherds leaning over a manger making baby talk to the baby, cattle lowing, the rustling of straw. God found a whole new way to communicate, a whole new way to say exactly the right thing. The Word took on a whole new language, and it turned out to be—baby talk.

What does a baby say? Actually, not much. Without the power of speech, they are, in fact, rather

¹ Eucharistic Prayer C, *Book of Common Prayer*, 370.

limited. But they do say two very important things: Here I am, and, I need you.

And God, in God's love, as the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us as a baby, says this as well: I am here. I need you.

Shocking, isn't it? The Word becomes flesh, a vulnerable, inarticulate baby. And we don't say, the message is this: someday, the child will grow, which is true, and become an adult, which is true, and will walk and talk and love and live and say things and do things that will show us just how much God loves us—all of which is true. But even here, even in these days of the Christmas season, what we celebrate is not the potential for communication that a baby has—that someday God will speak through incarnate life. What we celebrate is that this baby, the Word made flesh, was already a completely formed message of love, full of grace and truth toward us. Here I am. I am with you. I am for you. I am trusting myself to you. I need you.

In Graham Greene's novel, *The Heart of the Matter*, the character Scobie describes the incarnation, and the amazing risk God took in becoming human in such a vulnerable way, a pattern of openness that would continue throughout Jesus' life and in the sacraments, as well. The narrator says, "It seemed to him for a moment cruelly unfair of God to have exposed himself in this way, a man, a wafer of bread, first in the Palestinian villages and now here in the hot port, there, everywhere, allowing man to have his will of Him. Christ had told the rich young man to sell all and follow Him, but that was an easy rational step compared with this that God had taken, to put himself at the mercy of men who hardly knew the meaning of the word. How desperately God must love, he thought with shame."²

How desperately God must love. Desperately enough to find a new way to say exactly the right thing, which, even in the cries and coos of an infant, turns out to be: "Here's how much I love you."

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² Greene, *The Heart of the Matter*.

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