

“A Failure to Communicate”

John 10:22-31

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It ranks as the 11th most popular quote from a movie. It was spoken by Strother Martin who played the Captain, a prison warden in the 1967 film, *Cool Hand Luke*. It was spoken to Paul Newman, who played a convict by the name of Luke.

After Luke smarted off to the warden during one of their conversations, he was hit so hard he rolled down a hill. Looking at Luke who was lying in the dirt, the Captain said, “What we’ve got here is a failure to communicate.”

Today’s text can be summarized the same way. It describes a conversation between Jesus and the religious authorities that revealed a definite failure to communicate.

The setting for this passage is a porch. It was not like the porches of our childhood where rocking chairs and swings provided a place for family and friends to enjoy warm fellowship on a peaceful summer day.

This was a stately colonnade with magnificent pillars almost forty feet high that ran alongside the Court of the Gentiles in the Temple in Jerusalem. It was known as Solomon’s Porch and was a favorite gathering place for people to have meaningful dialogues about the mysteries of life and faith. Our text includes one of these conversations.

Jesus was in Jerusalem to celebrate the Festival of Dedication, sometimes known as the Festival of Lights. This festival commemorates the purification of the Temple in 164 B.C. after Syrian leader, Antiochus Epiphanes, turned it into a brothel and a shrine to Zeus. Judas Maccabeus led a revolt which resulted in expelling the Seleucid monarchy from Jerusalem so the Temple could be reclaimed and cleansed.

To this day, our Jewish friends celebrate this significant event in their history in the same month we celebrate Christmas. The common name for the Festival of Lights is Hanukkah, a time when Jews illuminate their homes, synagogues and temples with candlelight.

While at the Festival of Lights, Jesus was surrounded by some of the religious leaders who were already upset with him. “How long will you keep us in suspense?” they asked him. “If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.”

Jesus responded, “I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; but you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep.

My sheep hear my voice; I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand. The Father and I are one.”

Having said this we are told “the Jews picked up stones to stone him” John 10:24-31.

What strikes you most about this story? For me, it is the emotions displayed by the Pharisees. Their frustration, which quickly turned to anger, sent them into a rage as they gathered stones to throw at Jesus.

Why were the Pharisees so upset with Jesus? He refused to give them a yes or no answer when asked if he was the Messiah, which they strongly doubted.

If he actually was the Messiah, which they could not conceive, he was not doing what they thought the Messiah would do, and it was time to hold him accountable. For everyone’s benefit, it was time to clear the air. Jesus needed to speak clearly about his identity and mission.

What did the Pharisees expect Jesus to do if indeed he was the Messiah? For starters, they expected Jesus to begin his public ministry with them in Jerusalem, not among the common folk around the Sea of Galilee.

They expected the Messiah to compliment them for their fine leadership and to partner with them as they carried out their duties. Surely, the Messiah would be grateful for all they had done to pave the way for his arrival.

The religious authorities also expected the Messiah to be more militant and help them develop a strategy to run the Romans out of Judea. In their opinion, nothing was higher on their list of priorities for the Messiah than lifting the burden of the Roman Empire off their shoulders.

It did not take long for the Pharisees to realize Jesus shared few of their values and none of their priorities. As a result, nothing Jesus did made sense to them.

Why did Jesus begin his ministry at the Jordan River where he was baptized with repentant sinners?

Why did Jesus go to Galilee and call his disciples from the untrained and unknown ranks of the everyday people?

Why did Jesus spend time traveling the dusty Palestinian roads listening to people's stories and responding to their needs with grace and compassion?

Why was Jesus so critical of the religious leaders in Jerusalem, calling them hypocrites and vipers?

The Pharisees had no answers to these questions, and so they did what many confused people do when they are threatened. They began plotting ways to silence the messenger and to eliminate the threat.

The Pharisees were not the only ones frustrated, though. Jesus was, too. Why?

Evidently, Jesus felt the Pharisees should have known better. After all, they had been following him for some time, watching his every move and listening to him teach.

By now, Jesus believed they should have known who he was and what he was sent by God to do. They should have known what to look for to determine if he was the anointed one sent to reveal God's nature and dreams for all humanity.

By the way Jesus conducted his ministry, the Pharisees should have known he and God were one in mission, purpose, vision, values and priorities. As they listened to him teach, they should have realized from their study of the Law and the prophets they were listening to the voice of God who was fulfilling the prophets' grandest hopes and dreams.

The Pharisees did not, though, which led to their frustration morphing into rage. Their inability to control, change or intimidate Jesus brought the worst out in them. They decided to kill him.

What were Jesus' expectations that day in the Temple when the Pharisees approached him? What did he want them to do?

I believe Jesus wanted the religious authorities to open their hearts and minds and to begin a sincere dialogue with him about the mysteries of life and faith, much like Nicodemus did. If only they would have listened, Jesus would have shared with them everything he taught the disciples about the importance of faith and the purpose of religion. They refused, though, choosing instead to cling to their misplaced expectations and their bitter disappointment in Jesus to fulfill them.

How does this story speak to us today? I pondered this question for some time last week.

For me, it addresses our tendency to be disappointed in God when God does not meet our expectations. We, like the Pharisees, can become angry and unreasonable.

What do you do when you are disappointed in God? I believe it depends on your concept of God and your relationship with God.

If you have the same concept of God Jesus did, as a loving, loyal, nourishing, protecting and responsible shepherd, and as close a relationship with God as Jesus did, then at all times and under all circumstances you will trust God. Even in your darkest hours you will pray as Jesus did, “Nevertheless, not my will be done but yours.”

A healthy concept of God leads to the same kind of relationship you already have with a loving and responsible parent, a competent and compassionate physician, a wise and honest teacher, an engaged and empathetic mentor or a loyal and trusted friend.

In every one of these relationships, your goal is not to control or exploit the people who dearly love and care for you, but to listen to them with an open heart and mind and to follow their wise counsel. You expect them to be accessible, insightful, understanding, truthful, encouraging and loyal.

You want them to hold you accountable when you make decisions and to love you unconditionally when you make mistakes. You want them to tell you the brutal facts without beating you up. You want them to help you see when you are headed down the wrong path instead of letting you walk blindly into harm’s way. You want them to pick you up when you fall and to help you chart a new and better way forward. You want them to speak the truth in love, even when it sounds confusing or hurts.

People like this are priceless, and your relationship with them is too valuable to lose. With all your heart, soul, mind and strength you cherish and protect it.

Does this mean you never get upset with these people? Of course not, but under no circumstance do you let anything come between you and them. You know how much they contribute to your life and how much you need them.

Gratitude and humility keep you together. The search for an abundant and meaningful life sustains you when easy answers don’t come.

Gratitude and humility, along with the search for an abundant and meaningful life will keep us connected to God, too. Even when life is a mystery and faith is fuzzy, we’ll keep talking to God and listening to the Spirit.

We'll trust God just as Jesus did, and the same way he encouraged his disciples to trust him, because we are certain about one thing. The God who knows our name knows much more about us than our name.

This Good Shepherd also knows what we need, what threatens us, what we are afraid of, what challenges we face, where our wounds are, what our heart yearns for and where we need to go. Knowing this, the last thing we would ever do is demand the Good Shepherd exchange his dreams for our puny, self-serving expectations.

We are not going to do this even on the days we have more questions than answers. This would truly be a failure to communicate.