

GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Sheboygan, Wisconsin

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The Language of Faith

Today we continue a four part series in which explore the language of faith, and how language and faith shape each other.¹ What words do we use to describe the experience of faith? How do the words we use shape our own understanding? How do the words we use present barriers to those who have no experience of faith, or whose experience is different?

Last week we began by exploring *experience* and *sharing*. As individuals and then in small groups we first recalled times in our lives that “involved God,” and then recorded words we used in our minds in reflecting on the experience. We considered:

- Do the words involve/describe emotions or feelings?
- Do the words involve/describe sensations or feelings?
- Do the words involve/describe specific “things” that are *thought of* or *experienced* as “good” or “beautiful”?
- How do words describe the experience of a state of *being* in the “God experience”?

Next we practiced sharing our experiences in small groups, using the words in sentences. What we identified was that between the individual, subjective experience and the objective reality that is communicated, we encounter “boundary issues”. How do words allow us to classify boundary issues? How does the concept of absolutes like “love,” “good,” “beauty,” “truth,” and “being” allow us to share experience? Do they?

How does language help or hinder sharing? As we consider the challenges in sharing faith, let’s begin with an example that highlights the role of language. Consider TED and TED Talks.

TED = Technology, Entertainment, Design. TED is an annual conference series, run by a nonprofit organization in Silicon Valley, dedicated to “ideas worth spreading”. TED has been described by some as a sort of secular church for the elite, based upon the conceit that smart people, gathered, can improve themselves and the world. There’s a lot of good thinking to be found in the TED Talks (available online), but consider:

- Most people don’t know what TED stands for, or who “runs” it. And, amongst those who do know one sometimes encounters an attitude that if you have to ask what TED stands for, you aren’t “in the know”.²
- TED talks use common language and terms of arts from science, economics, cybernetics and media, social theory, gender theory and politics. If you are not

¹ Just as “You are what you eat,” so do we believe what we pray, when we’re paying attention!

² The Church combated a similar problem in Gnosticism, in which restricted or secret knowledge or *gnosis* was only for initiates.

current in these terms of art³, a lot of the talks don't make sense. If you are not highly-educated, the talks may not make sense.

In the Church we say we speak the language of faith. We also use terms of art, like the seven deadly sins, the cardinal virtues, the theological virtues. We speak of sin, fallenness, salvation. In a society which uses language of utility (*What is it? How does it work? How much does it cost? Is it useful to me? Is it functional?*) we use language of theological concepts (*New life in Christ, Salvation, Atonement*) and of virtue (what/who we are called to be). Society may speak of "dysfunction" when the Church speaks of "sin," and does not restrict what is meant sin to dysfunction. This means that there is often a boundary caused by how we speak, even before we get to try to describe what we experience or feel.

Let's look at a couple of Church examples:

1. *Are you saved?* This is a question that is encountered in Evangelical Christian circles. The problem with the question is that there's a boundary issue embedded in it.
 - a. The person asking has his/her own concept/experience of being saved—what it feels like and how it is lived out.
 - b. The person being asked does not know what the questioner really means, and so will project his/her own doubts and fears. (*Do I have to make a public confession/statement? Do I have to be dunked in water?*)
2. *The sin of pride:* I can be proud of the achievements of my child. I can be proud of my own achievements. If I "give the glory to God" there is no problem with being proud; it is not sinful. Pride in a theological sense involves the substitution of my own will for that of God. I decide that I can make my own decisions independent of God's will.
 - a. If I speak of pride to a person unfamiliar with the theological construct, I won't make sense. The same is perhaps even more true when we speak of humility, for even in the Church there is a lingering fear that to be humble I must somehow be a "doormat for Jesus".

Meeting people where they are: We are enjoined by Our Lord to "go" to all. We need to meet people where they are, and this involves also paying attention to their language. How do they describe what is important to them, what they struggle with?

Before we can communicate about the faith we must first focus on how we communicate. This involves building community as we are learning to share a common language. We need to focus on community, on relationship first. It is only in the context of relationship that we can begin to communicate. Perhaps we can start with what is shared. For example, if an Evangelical Christian asks the question, "Are you saved?" absent a relationship, it is rare that the person asked will engage in a serious exploration about what is being asked. But, if a relationship is first established, and common ground cultivated, the question will have the context of the questioned person knowing something about the questioner. The question is more likely to be received as an expression of concern and interest, rather than as "random" or (worse) aggressive.

³ *Speaking of "terms of art"* we can't throw stones at TED! Just look at all of the terms we use, and then need to define. In the Episco-facts section of our own website we do, thankfully, provide definitions. See <http://www.gracesheboygan.com/index.php/resources/faq>

But when we start thinking about what is shared, we run into the problem of relativism. The concept of absolutes in our society is no longer agreed upon. As soon as you mention “truth,” for example, you’ll probably get a debate going about “your truth” and “my truth”. We have been conditioned to use relativistic language, as “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” But even if we believe that beauty, for example, is subjective, we each experience it. So let’s start with this example.

Exercise: In your own mind think about something that you have experienced as beautiful. It can be something in nature or in a work of art, or in a person, or in an experience that is not easily categorized. Now, use words to describe to yourself how this beauty was experienced by you.

- How would you describe this beauty?
- How would you describe this beauty to someone who does not share your taste in art, or your interest in nature?
- How would you relate your experience of beauty to your experience of yourself, when you encountered this beauty?
- Are you using any “terms of art”? How would you describe the same thing using other “common” language.

Next week: Next week we will continue to explore the boundaries between subjective experience and objective reality, and how these relate to the revelation of love, of good, and of truth. We will also begin to explore how to establish common language.