

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. 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?

We began by exploring *experience* and *sharing*, and practiced sharing our experiences in small groups. What we identified was that between individual, subjective experience and the objective reality that is communicated, we encounter “boundary issues”. We explored how the concept of absolutes like “love,” “good,” “beauty,” “truth,” and “being” allow us to share experience, but also how language can both help and hinder sharing.

Next we explored how we need to meet people where they are, and this involves also paying attention to their language. How people describe what is important to them, and what they struggle with, will arise in the context of relationship, of community. This highlighted the issue we will explore this week.

The reality of fear: Fear is the biggest barrier to communication. This is true when we examine the dynamic of communication about faith in any direction—whether the fear is ours or the fear of one with whom we seek to communicate about faith.

1. *Fear in sharing:* In order to share experience and belief I have to share myself. I have to be vulnerable. I have to be able to speak about not only what I have experienced but of what I need. I have to be able to give voice to my own fears and questions. If I can’t share this way, my attempts to communicate faith will generally be received as either just my “own thing,” which has no real bearing on the life of the listener, or pointless boasting.

I may be afraid that I will have to *testify*, to enter into some kind of self-revelation of a life changing experience. I may be afraid that I will have to reveal what has been broken or missing in my life.

2. *Fear as a listener:* If I am prepared to allow someone to share his/her faith, or someone to pray for me, I may fear that I’ll have to reveal something about myself. I may have to admit that there is something that needs to change in my life. *I may not be able to name what’s missing.* I may “lose control”.

The need for naming: Every one of us has aspects in his or her personhood and identity that we would change. Every one of us experiences aspects of brokenness, the need for love, affirmation, redemption. Every one of us has a personal history with details we would rather not revisit, let alone reveal to another. Oftentimes we can name what is wrong, and be specific about it to ourselves, but too often we can’t, and so we “cope”.

Coping can be rewarded or it can be very dysfunctional. If I am a person who has a need for control because—to cite a proverbial story—when I was a kid other kids took my toys away in a sand box, I might channel this need for control in ways that result in me being identified as a driving business leader. I may be very successful as an entrepreneur. On the other hand, if I have a need for control because I have been controlled too much by a domineering parent, I may focus on what I can control, like what I eat, and develop an eating disorder. The point in these examples is not to focus on how we might diagnose what (a need for control) drives behavior (functional or dysfunctional), but that if we can't name what is the underlying motive for behavior, we can't share it.

If we can't name it, we can't share it. If what we can't name is a burden, if what we can't name leaves a hole we can't fill or a pain that won't go away, we are in real danger of "self medicating". For example, regardless of the underlying physiology involved, substance abuse is a form of self medication. Again and again in the testimonies of those who have progressed in recovery one encounters descriptions of the need to blunt pain or the need to fill a "hole".

Our vocation must include being able to name what is lacking in life. Whatever pain or hole exists, whatever shame or fear, can never be cured, filled, overcome by any substance, or by any behavior, but only by God. And we are surrounded by people who, because they do not have experience of faith, will keep looking elsewhere for "answers". Which means ...

The fear that must be addressed is ours: Anyone with whom we seek to share our faith may well have fears and needs of his or her own. We can expect that, but we can't begin to do anything about his fear or her fear unless and until we first recognize and name our own fear. So what do we do about this?

At 1 John 4.8 the apostle famously states "God is love". Even those outside of the Church usually know this line, but how often do we pay attention to what the consequence of this is? The apostle proceeds to elaborate, writing:

Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. So we know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. ... There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. (1 Jn. 4.15-18)

In other words, when we recognize that God abides in us, and that He counts us worthy of the life of His only Son, then the very "smallness" of self that often gives rise to the fear of sharing and revelation is cast away because we know and experience that we are loved.

What's the necessary corollary? I can overcome fear, I can communicate, I can share, I can proclaim the Gospel only by the awareness of how *God* looks upon me, upon His beloved creature made in His own image and likeness. And when I share and reveal of myself, when I admit to brokenness, I participate in the same self-giving that finds its source and summation in the reality that God became one of us, and gave Himself for us!

Does this sound a little "Evangelical"? If so, this is only because the experience many have had in the Church is one in which faith is made to be a private matter only. We

need to claim and reclaim the world for Christ. We're not going to do this by not sharing.

Next week: Next week we will sum up what we have discussed so far about issues of language and communication, about the boundaries between subjective experience and objective reality. We will review how fear presents the underlying stumbling block in most failure to communicate, and how to address fear in others. We will then work on addressing our own fears by practicing how to share.