

GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Sheboygan, Wisconsin

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The Language of Faith

Today we conclude our four part series exploring the language of faith, how language and faith shape each other, and what barriers exist to communicating in matters of faith. 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? To review:

1. What is being communicated?
 - a. What we are trying to communicate is *something about God*:
 - i. In order for *me* to communicate something about God, this must relate to an *experience* of God in my life.
 1. The experience need not be dramatic or “mystical”.
 2. The experience may be private or shared.
 3. The experience may or may not involve specific practices, like prayer or worship.
 4. The experience can be positive or negative.
 - ii. In describing an experience I am describing feelings, emotions, sensations, thoughts (*what* and *how*).
 - iii. In order to describe a God experience, I must reveal myself.
 1. This requires relationship.
 2. This requires me to become vulnerable.
2. What is *not* being communicated? The words we use may not be understood as we use them. For people with no familiarity with faith, with theological concepts, with Scripture, our language can be a barrier unless we understand their perspective and their questions.
 - a. Communication requires *relationship*.
3. The greatest barrier to communicating about faith is fear.
 - a. The listener may fear commitment.
 - b. The one who is sharing may fear revealing himself/herself.
 - c. The one who is sharing may fear rejection.
 - d. The one who is sharing may fear that he/she does not “know enough”.

The reality of fear highlights the holy reality that “Knowledge’ puffs up, but love builds up” (1 Cor. 8.1). We must remind ourselves that we are not required to “know” anything in sharing faith.

We live in a society which is very good at characterizing the *what* and *how* of life. We have been remarkably successful in the physical sciences in explaining how things work in a cause-and-effect model of a material universe. But this success runs up against the problem that the scientific method cannot define *purpose*, as in “What

should I do?” Science just can’t answer “why” questions, and so either tends to ignore the questions with answers that sound suspiciously like “because,” or to ignore the questions by denying the ideas and existence of purpose and meaning, saying, in effect “It’s all random.” But human beings are human because we ask *why*, because we are not random. The questions that we all ask involve questions like “Why am I here? Why am I here? Should I live in this way, or that? Am I loved?”

Knowledge addresses questions of what and how, but not why. Knowledge is, however, what we tend to focus on, trying to “figure out” purpose and meaning, trying to “figure out” the why’s of being, and worrying about whether we will “know enough” to persuade somebody else to think/believe as we do.

Knowledge is a two-edged sword. Either we believe we have knowledge, and so others must see the world through our eyes (and this distances them from us), or we fear we don’t have knowledge, and will not “know enough” to share faith. Which is why the apostle points us to love. Love involves sharing, the giving of self. Love involves vulnerability. In loving another I risk rejection and hurt. But when I am “in Christ” I can share His presence; I can be His eyes, ears, hands, and strong back.

Today: We close this review of how faith is communicated with further practice. In small groups (4-5) spend time sharing a God story. It doesn’t matter what the story is. Focus on what you have to share of yourself in order to share the story. Then spend time talking about each other’s stories. What each listener needed to have knowledge of was what you revealed, what you shared. This may have been enough to allow them to experience what you were trying to communicate, or it may have just led to questions. But even if it only led to questions this was part of a process of revelation in which you and the listeners started exploring *why* together. In sharing faith we share in God’s revelation of Himself!

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.