

"A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE"

INTRODUCTION

"What we've here is a failure to communicate...." Movie goers in the congregation perhaps will recognize that line as a line taken from the movie, "Cool Hand Lake" which is currently playing across the street at the RKO. I haven't seen the movie yet, but hope to very soon. I did see a preview of it one night a couple of weeks ago and one scene that briefly flashed across the screen has lingered in my mind. A prison warden - tough, cynical - watching a chain gang at hard labor in the fields says with derision and contempt "What we've here is a failure to communicate...." I've heard that line a number of times in recent days on the radio and television in connection with the promotion of the movie. It's a line that has been haunting me and I am using it as a starting point for today's meditation. "What we've here is a failure to communicate".

DEVELOPMENT

Recall that scene in T. S. Eliot's "The Cocktail Party" where Celia, aware of the deep loneliness of her life, says to her doctor:

"....it isn't that I want to be alone, but that everyone's alone, or so it seems to me. They make noises, and think they are talking to each other; they make faces and think they understand each other. And I'm sure they don't...."

And when the doctor suggests that most people settle for that kind of relationship, Celia, asks with a kind of desperate urgency, "But is that the best life?"

It is a painful and piercing question: "Is that the best life?" Ours is an age of paradox. On the one hand, there is an escalation of words or noises, and on the other hand, there is a de-escalation of real contact and understanding between people. The communication gap is everywhere. "What we've here is a failure to communicate". It exists in so many areas - within marriages and families; between the races, the generations, the sexes. It exists between economic classes, between governments and citizens, and between the nations of the world. The result is a kind of horrible fragmentation of the human family and a sense of impersonalization and loneliness corroding our lives. "They make noises and think they are talking to each other. They make faces and think they understand each other. And I'm sure they don't. Is that the best life?"

A WORD FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT

Perhaps it is just for such a time as ours and for people such as ourselves that the author of the Letter of James in the New Testament wrote these words: "But each of you....must be quick to listen.....and slow to speak". I think we have here some words that provide us with a clue to that better life for which all of us long and look. They are words that invite us to a ministry of listening, of hearing, of seeking to understand one another.

In Morris West's novel, "The Shoes of the Fisherman", the newly elected Pope looks at all the vast machinery and projects of the church and then says:

"If we lose contact with man - suffering, sinful, lost, confused men crying in the night, women agonizing, children weeping - then we, too, are lost because we shall have done everything but the one thing necessary".

I am increasingly disturbed and troubled by those words. Is it possible that we can become so goal-focused and so pre-occupied and concerned with our various causes and projects that it will become difficult, if not impossible for us to find and relate to other people with different goals, with different causes and convictions from our own?

I think it is not only possible, but becoming probable. I have no simple solutions to offer, for I do not think we are called to compromise our convictions about what is true or forsake the causes which we believe to be right. But necessary as these are, perhaps there is one thing even more necessary and vital. It is that contact - that communication - that compassionate understanding - between persons without which no one of us can live. And so this line from the New Testament offers one clue to that kind of meaningful contact.

QUICK TO LISTEN

"Be quick to listen...." - this is a way of helping other people to life. And yet, how few of us are willing to stop and listen to the other person. Robert Frost has a little poem called "Revelation" and in it there are these thoughtful lines:

"We make ourselves a place apart
Behind light words that tease and flout,
But oh - the agitated heart,
Till someone really find us out"

I wonder.....isn't there in all of us that longing to be "found out" - that is, to be known - accepted - understood - for what we really are? But how can that happen unless someone cares enough to listen to us - to hear us out of our place - apart.

Though I'm very guilty of doing it myself, I'm becoming increasingly uneasy about the labels that we apply to each other. We are prone to categorize or classify people into types - teen-agers, hawks, doves, liberals, conservatives, fundamentalists, slum-dwellers, suburbanites, ministers, laymen, whippersnappers, fogeys, man, woman, single, married, rich man, poor man, beggar-man, thief, black white, pink, yellow - and so on and on we go. And so having filed people away like things, we no longer hear them as persons. Instead, we hear what we expect that kind of person to say. We hear the labels that we have pasted on them. Then we address our arguments, our rebuttals, our words to those labels, and we end up forcing each other into hiding with our words that "tease and flout", accuse and exhort. We make noises, and think we are talking to each other. We make faces and think we understand each other. "What we've here is a failure to communicate"

"I have to say what is in my heart" said Eartha Kitt recently to the First Lady of our Land. "I have lived in the gutters." And to her great credit, Mrs. Johnson candidly replied: "I am sorry. I cannot understand the things that you do. I have not lived with the background that you have". This is the heart of the matter. Because we have no experienced the hurts and humiliations that are the lingering heritage of hundreds of millions of people of color around the world, because we have not experienced the anguish, we so often do not understand the anger. It is there and it must be faced - openly, honestly, not with scorn or bitterness, or anger, but with compassionate understanding. Heaven help us if we fail to communicate.

REAL COMMUNICATION

"Be quick to listen....and slow to speak". Real communication is not about things, but it is between people. Listening is a way of communicating without words. It is a way of telling others that we respect them, that we accept them, that we are concerned for them. It is not a matter of agreeing with each other, which is really unnecessary and probably unhealthy. But it is a matter of understanding each other, of accepting each other, which is so critical. "If we lose contact....with each other....men...crying in the night, women agonizing, children weeping....we are lost". ~~To listen beneath the words to the person who is trying to tell you something....trying to tell you who he is....if you will just help him by listening to him.....I'm lonely, I'm afraid, I'm confused, I'm insecure, I'm a failure, I'm a phoney, I'm guilty, I need to be encouraged, helped, appreciated...~~

Back in December, in one of the issues of Time, there was an open letter to the editors about an article they had run. It is a letter from a college student and I would share some of it with you:

"I love my parents and I know they love me, but they've ruined my life. Your paragraphs under 'Listen' very well sum up what I'm trying to say. I could never tell my parents anything, it was always 'I'm too busy....too tired....that's not important....that's stupid....can't you think of better things.....oh, your friends are wrong.....they're stupid. As a result I stopped telling my parents anything. All communication ceased. Oh - we had love. Prompted on my side by an ever-present fear of my mother and pity for my father and prompted on their side by the thought that I was their responsibility and if I went wrong, they would be punished by God.

Now they have sent me to a particular kind of college. They knew I didn't want to come here but made me anyway. Their daughter wasn't going to be corrupted. I had already been saved from the evils of dating and doing things that 'everyone else did'. What is the result of this excellent upbringing. I'm 18 years old, drink whenever I get the chance, have smoked pot, and as of a very eventful Thanksgiving vacation am no longer a virgin. Why? Was it my parents or just me? I'm so very confused, but who can I talk to? No - not my parents. My parents could read this and never dream that it was their daughter. I have only one important plea to parents. Listen.....Listen....listen again. Please - I know the consequences and I am in hell."

What we want and need from each other is not answers - not advice - but contact and acceptance. We need each other. And there is one thing that we can all do. We can be completely present - we can all be there, we can control the tendency of our mind to wander from the situation we are in toward yesterday, toward tomorrow, toward something we have forgotten, toward what we are going to say in rebuttal, toward some place we are going next. It is so hard to do, but it is harder to understand afterward wherein we fell so short. It was when we ceased to give our entire attention to the person before us.

CONCLUSION Be quick to listen and slow to speak - for if you have listened deeply and thoughtfully to another person and so given yourself to him, your words may be few but mighty in their power to heal and to help and to say, "Yes... yes...yes....I understand. I am with you.....come out from your place, apart - take my hand.....take my heart. I am really like you. We are brothers".

Do you not suppose that helps the other person out of hiding into life, a far better life than noises and faces and terrible loneliness. And do you not suppose that God is in that listening, in that communication. It's my belief that He is!

LET US PRAY O Thou who art infinitely greater than our noblest thoughts of Thee, yet more intimately near our minds and spirits than we can dream, thanks be to Thee that Thou hast put immortal longings into human hearts.

For ideals which haunt us.

For noble desires which move us to long for goodness, peace, truth and beauty.

For high ambitions to make life richer and fuller for all men, we thank Thee, O God.

For life itself, with its mystery and its meaning, its disappointments and satisfactions; for health and strength, for food and clothing and shelter;

For friendship and love and everything that makes life here rich and meaningful, we give thee thanks.

This hour we thank Thee for Thyself and especially for all Thou hast done for us and art giving to us in Jesus Christ: for His truth, His words and actions, for His love for all men; for His nearness in the reading and the preaching of the Scriptures and in the Sacrament of His supper.

Behold us, O Father of our spirits, and unite us as one family in thy presence. Keep us on the highway of those who are faithful to Thee and kinder than necessary to others.

In His spirit, we pray.