

**Don Brown
St. Mary the Virgin
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Transfiguration**

An immigrant from a non-English speaking country was struggling with the complexities of our language. He asked an American friend, “What is a polar bear?”

His friend replied that polar bears live very far up north in the region of the Arctic Circle. The immigrant asked, “But what does a polar bear do?” “Well,” replied the American, “He sits on a big slab of ice and eats fish.”

“Oh no!” proclaimed the immigrant, “I will not do it.” His befuddled American friend then asked, “What won’t you do?” The immigrant said, “I’ve just been asked to be a polar bear at a funeral.”

We may chuckle but communication problems are a constant difficulty in daily living. How easy it is to misunderstand what someone says or to miss the intent of the message that is being conveyed.

For instance, while there has been information about Safe Church policies in news articles from St. Mary’s over the last two years, recently the clergy and vestry have received emails wondering if Safe Church was something new and if it is being used appropriately at St. Mary’s.

I hope the article in last weeks email Highlights as well as in the Sunday printed announcements (also reprinted in today’s announcements for good measure) makes it clear to everyone that Safe Church policies, which were set forth by the national church and the Diocese of California, apply to all of us who work with children and other vulnerable folks in the church.

I particularly want people new to St. Mary's and all parents here to know that we are dedicated to seeing to it that your children are being cared for appropriately in this church. If you have questions about this, please contact one of the clergy.

Peter Drucker, often referred to as the "Father of American Management," claims that 60% of management problems are a result of faulty communications. A great many marriage and family therapists will testify to the large number of marital problems that result from the inability of couples to speak honestly and openly with each other. Criminologists tell us that upwards of 90% of all criminals have difficulty communicating with others.

Anyone who reads the bible with care discovers that in spite of trying, God has had great difficulties communicating his message of love and its imperative for personal and community responsibility in our daily interactions with others.

Why God chose to communicate with humanity through the writings and experiences of a small tribe of people of in the Middle East....the Hebrews is one of the great mysteries of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Reflecting on this choice, William Ewer, a British journalist penned this little epigram: How odd of God/To choose the Jews. (Wikipedia) But I guess God had reasons. Still over the course of several centuries of interaction with God, the Jewish people compiled their experiences and insights and gave the whole human race a sacred document---the Hebrew Bible. The problem is....the message just had not been clearly heard and understood.

Finally in the ultimate act of self-communication God came not just to the Hebrews but also to all of us in the flesh and blood of Jesus of Nazareth. The Gospel of John puts it this way, "The Word became flesh and dwelled among us."

Jesus was a living, breathing, talking, active message from God. He was the Word of God incarnated, that is to say, enfleshed, which is precisely the literal meaning of "incarnation." Still when we study or hear the gospels read at church,

it's clear that even the disciples, the people closest to Jesus, didn't clearly hear or receive Jesus' transformative message of God's love and justice.

What today's Gospel reading presents us with is another example of the Lord's persistence in communication. Disciples Peter, James and John go with Jesus up to the top of a mountain to pray. During their time on that mountain, the disciples see Jesus transformed by an inner, radiant light, a light that I suspect was always there but they just hadn't seen it before that mountain top encounter.

Then two iconic Jewish figures appear, Moses the greatest of the Jewish lawgivers and Elijah the quintessential Jewish prophet. They talk with Jesus whose life was the summation of the message of all the Hebrew lawgivers and prophets. As the reading from Second Peter recounted, For he received honor and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, "This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain. (2 Peter 1:16b-18)

Luke's gospel varies the account a bit by adding that a voice (presumably God's) comes from a cloud saying, "This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!" (Luke 9:36)

"Listen to him." That is the deepest need all of us have-----to listen and really hear Jesus words of encouragement, of reconciliation, of forgiveness, of challenge, of love, of hope, of new life."

Still the disciples, even after this experience, did not fully get the message. It took the crucifixion and resurrection to finally convince them and transform their lives. St. Paul, who came along a few years after the resurrection, encountered Jesus message of love and forgiveness as he traveled the road from Jerusalem to Damascus where he intended to persecute the new followers of Jesus. Paul's life of hatred and vengeance was totally turned upside down.

It was in listening to and knowing Jesus that Paul came to experience the message he communicates so eloquently in the passage from his First Letter to the Corinthians: “If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.”(I Cor. 13:1)

God’s communication finally got through to Paul and he spent the rest of his life trying to quell conflicts in the emerging Christian community as he preached Christ’s message of love and reconciliation.

In this, St. Mary the Virgin’s 125th anniversary year, we have discovered anew that our congregation, like pretty much every Christian congregation throughout history, is in no way immune from miscommunication and conflict.

We are not confused like the immigrant who did not want to be a “polar bear” but all of us could benefit from a refresher course on living lives of love and reconciliation and learning how to listen carefully to each other, in our congregational life and our personal lives.

You will be receiving information about a special program that will draw on a relational process called Indaba, which has been very helpful in the Anglican Communion in enabling people and churches with very different views on many matters in communicating and achieving a degree of reconciliation with each other. St. Mary’s members David Crosson, with the assistance of Georgene Keeler, Jessica Metoyer, and Marla Perkins are guiding this effort with the assistance of the Rev. Dr. Paula Nesbitt who presented the Indaba method earlier this summer at our Summer in the City formation program.

This Sunday as we celebrate the Feast of the Transfiguration we are invited not only see Jesus in a fuller light but also to live our lives with the conviction that we can be instruments of Christ’s love and reconciliation. So be it. AMEN