

Sermon by the Rector

Sunday, January 18, 2009: The Second Sunday after the Epiphany

In order to be honest, we often have to be mediate between the contents of our hearts and minds, and the world. We have to "process" both thoughts and feelings in order to communicate them to others, and even to ourselves, in a way that does them justice.

Occasionally, of course, we just blurt something out, or burst out laughing, or crying. But unmediated communication is more the exception than the rule, the processed, mediated expression can be just as honest, or more so.

Sometimes "mediated" becomes "guarded", and "guarded" shades into "guileful". In guarded communication, we think a lot about what we're going to say, and when and how, so as to accomplish our goals, avoid problems, or both. There's nothing wrong with being guarded, and a lot right. Political success depends on it, but it's equally important for a parent raising children, a manager leading a department, a pastor shepherding a congregation.

Guile is different. Guile recognizes that self-disclosure makes us vulnerable, tries to make sure the other person is always the first to show their hand, and then takes full advantage of the vulnerability this creates. In today's gospel Jesus contrasts Nathanael, a straightforward son of Israel, with Jacob, the Israelite full of guile. Jacob wanted to usurp his brother Esau, to take from Esau the privileges and rights of the firstborn. But he kept his desires completely to himself, and waited for Esau to give him something he could use. The opportunity came when Esau, at the end of a long day of hunting, blurted out in Jacob's presence: "I'm famished! I'd do anything for some food." Jacob offered him some stew, in exchange for his rights as the first born. Esau took the offer, and the guileful patriarch had what he wanted.

Underlying all human communication – necessarily mediated, prudently guarded, or manipulative and guileful – is the following belief: if I say what I really think and express what I really feel, I won't get a fair hearing. I need to be careful, even calculating, or I'll get hurt. Often, we're right. But sometimes, we need to speak directly and openly, to lay our cards on the table even if we might get hurt.

I think a President Obama will face this issue. He won by virtue of a campaign whose principal strength was guardedness, in the form of rigorous message control. (If you have any doubts about this, ask yourself how many unscripted remarks you've heard from Joseph Biden since he was nominated for the vice-presidency. Few, if any.) But some issue, some challenge, some struggle will require him to speak in a less guarded and careful way, to take us into his counsel and let the chips fall where they may.

This challenge comes to all of us, and the deep-seated apprehension – that we won't get a fair hearing – rises with it. At these moments, when a relationship, a task, a goal or a movement depends on somebody setting aside guardedness and guile, the gospel message makes itself heard.

The gospel message is this: we always get a fair hearing from God. Psalm 139 tells us this, in a poetic way. God knows what we think before we even think it. Before we speak, God hears. A fair hearing is guaranteed; in fact, it's already been granted.

Jesus hears Nathanael's unvarnished skepticism: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" And he immediately takes Nathanael into his company, and speaks with him in an especially full and intimate way. Nathanael, unguarded in his speech, gets a full and fair hearing from his Master, and from his blurted-out words comes a relationship of extraordinary depth.

How can we know this for sure? How can we feel Jesus' attentiveness in our hearts?

Here's one key: there can be no drive-by baring of the soul. The moments for showing our hand, laying our cards on the table, come in the context of relationships characterized by mutual commitment. Our "fair hearing" from God makes itself known as a relationship unfolds, and its moments of honesty create a deepening intimacy. This is why Paul condemns fornication so vigorously in today's reading. The casual, fake intimacy of sex with a prostitute belies the conditions that must obtain for real self-revelation to take place.

God promises the young Samuel that none of his words will fall to the ground, i.e., go unheard, unheeded, without bearing fruit. This promise holds true for us too. We may hold our thoughts and feelings close, not lay our cards on the table. We may even do this with guile, as Jacob did, seeking to make someone else be the first to speak. But God sees those thoughts and feelings already, hears even the words we don't speak, and causes them to bear fruit in ways we may not have expected.

Jacob became pre-eminent, but only through a rigorous journey of self-purification and a wrestling match with an angel. His unspoken desire bore fruit in a way he couldn't have imagined. His unspoken, closely-held words did not fall to the ground.

We may speak mostly in careful and guarded ways. God understands. The capacity to do so is a gift of God's mercy, given so we can protect ourselves. But God has already come within our walls, grasped the full range of thought and depth of feeling we might seek to mask. We've already gotten a full and fair hearing. Our carefully-spoken words

don't fall to the ground. In fact, they often reveal more about us than we might care to make known. But this is part of God's plan, too, and it's the royal road to real wisdom.

And when the time comes to speak unguardedly, with as much directness and honesty as we can, God stands with us in a special way. Unguarded expression often turns things upside down, shakes the foundations, makes us question what we've taken for granted. But we know that God is often at work most powerfully precisely in such times, to re-define and re-create us. Words spoken with unusual directness certainly don't fall to the ground. They ascend, into the heart of God, who has already given them a fair hearing, and make us new.

The time is not always right for unguarded communication. Sometimes, even guile is at least a necessary evil. But our new president, all our leaders, and all of us should remember: sometimes we need to speak from the heart, show our hand. This makes us vulnerable, and often unleashes unanticipated consequences. But in the context of an ongoing and committed relationship – between President and people, between close friends, between parent and child, between God and Samuel, between Jesus and Nathanael – it brings us a wisdom otherwise beyond our reach.