

Turning The Tables

The following items were from some letters received by a welfare department:

- * "I cannot get sick pay. I have 6 children. Can you tell me why?"
- * "I am glad to report that my husband, who was reported missing, is now dead."
- * This is my 8th child. What are you going to do about it?"
- * I am very annoyed to find you have branded my son illiterate. This is a dirty lie, as I married his father a week after he was born."
- * I am forwarding my marriage certificate and 3 children. One is a mistake, as you can see."
- * You have changed my little boy to a girl. Will this make a difference?"
- * In accordance with your instructions, I have given birth to twins in the enclosed envelope."

It's often easy for misunderstanding and confusion to arise in our communication with one another, isn't it? Sometimes one word spoken in the heat of the moment or heart incorrectly can cause a great deal of pain - and hours - sometimes years of hard feelings.

Words are very important - and can be either tools or weapons - depending on how we choose to use them. It also depends on how we choose to hear and interpret those words that can make a vast difference to the outcome.

In today's gospel reading from Luke, we find ourselves as eavesdroppers on a conversation Jesus is having with a group of 'church' people (*to put it into our terms*) - the Sadducees. The Sadducees were a conservative, mostly wealthy group who held very rigid beliefs about a variety of subjects. Its obvious from the beginning that they are not sincere about wanting answers to their questions - and that their agenda is to put Jesus on the defensive - and back him into a corner that he can't get out of. They focus their questions about life after death (something, by the way, that they don't believe in.) In biblical times, the lot of women was very poor. They were among the most vulnerable in society. Women were considered to be property in many respects - and relied very much on their husband's ability to provide for the family.

There was a law - the law of levirate marriage - that stated that a women who was widowed without children should be cared for and given the possibility of children by having one of the deceased close male relatives marry her - usually a brother. This same situation will come up again on Tuesday evening for those of you coming to the 'Bad Girls' series as we look at the story of Tamar. The question posed to Jesus, therefore, was a trick one - based on the hypothetical situation in which a woman becomes the widow of all 7 brothers in a family before dying herself. Whose wife, then, will the woman be in the afterlife?

The exaggeration of the problem in this made-up situation is obviously designed to poke fun at the very idea of resurrection - and to embarrass Jesus. How would **we** respond in Jesus' place? He wasn't stupid - he knew exactly what this group of Sadducees were up to. But where **we** might have responded defensively, or in anger - Jesus chose to approach the situation in a different way. In a sense, he turned the tables on them - and by doing so, showed us a different strategy for responding in difficult circumstances.

The first thing he did was to **listen**. He knew that they were out to try and trap him - but chose not to rush in to cut them off at the pass. In a sense, Jesus afforded them the respect that they denied him by simply listening to what they had to say.

Listening real and active listening - and not just hearing - is a lost art in our society. There's lots of talking going on - lots of noise. But there is very little listening happening. The CBC had a series of commercials a while back on TV making the point that if we are ever going to get together - if we are ever going to accomplish anything on an individual, national or global level - we have to start listening to each other.

Here are some statistics that I read recently:

- * There are more than 50 ongoing conflicts in the world today.
- * Over 200,000 children under the age of 15 are soldiers;
- * 90% of the more than 14 million refugees in the world are running from conflict - of which 75 % are women and children

Those are appalling figures! And in the light of our scripture reading for this morning - we have to ask the question - what would happen if there was more listening happening on a global scale? What would happen if global leaders followed Jesus' example - sat down together - and really listened to each other? An appropriate question, don't you think - on this Remembrance Sunday?

Listening is so important in all levels of our lives. In preparing for today's sermon, I came across several interesting little proverbs that are worth a second glance. For example:

- * you cannot listen and talk at the same time;
- * its impossible for a worthwhile thought to enter your mind through an open mouth;
- * maybe the eyes are the windows of the soul - but that still doesn't make the mouth the doorway to the brain;
- * and how about this one - a closed mouth gathers no feet
- * and my favourite - an Irish proverb that I sometimes use in weddings:
God gave us 2 ears and 1 mouth so that we might learn to listen twice as much as we speak!

All worthwhile thinking about - especially in difficult circumstances such as the one Jesus found himself in. So - the first step, if we would follow his example - is simply to listen before we respond - and try to identify the deeper issues that may be hidden what is being said.

The second thing was that when Jesus **did** answer - he didn't reply in kind. He knew the intent of the Sadducees was unkind - that there was a hidden agenda in their question. But he chose not to respond harshly or unkindly. Nor does he reply in an attempt to set another trap with **his** question. Rather than take offense, Jesus turns the tables by viewing the situation as a teachable moment - thereby setting it in a more positive frame of mind. Something, perhaps to keep in mind before **we** jump in with both barrels blasting!

He then goes on to answer their question - using the language and beliefs that they could accept. The Sadducees accepted as Scripture only the Pentateuch - that is, the first 5 books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy).

Jesus refers to the book of Exodus in an attempt to put the conversation on common ground - establishing a place where, hopefully, some honest dialogue could take place.

Sometimes, we too, need to try a little harder to find common ground to air our concerns, differences and grievances. It may mean some compromise - a little give and take - but at least then there is a chance for honest and creative dialogue - rather than simply criticism, innuendo and accusation.

Along with this, we must also try to find ways of not only meeting each other on common ground - but of expressing our concerns in a constructive way. The old adage that you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar is very true!

A young man was applying for a job as a clerk in a shoe store. The store owner asked him, "Suppose that a woman customer asked you 'Don't you think one of my feet is bigger than the other?' What would you say?" The young man responded promptly, "I'd say ' Oh no, madam! If anything, one is a little smaller than the other!'"

Sometimes, there are better ways of expressing ourselves - ways that affirm and create an openness to listening. Jesus showed us that time and again - but we all need some practice!

This morning - in this passage of scripture from Luke - Jesus teaches us a valuable lesson about relationships and communication. Dealing with family, co-workers and people at church is not always easy. If we feel someone is trying to trap us with a question - or back us into a corner - our first impulse is to respond negatively.

When these situations arise - remembering Jesus' interaction with the Sadducees is helpful. First - we need to listen to people, and try to identify the deeper issues that are expressed in what they are saying - or not saying. What people say is often not what is really bothering them. Then we need to try to find common ground for dialogue. Words can alienate - but they can also be bridges to stronger relationships. Hopefully - in this family of God - each one of us will strive to build bridges rather than walls - following the example of Jesus, who shows us the way and gives us the strength to accomplish it.