

12th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Introduction

Having spent the day telling the crowds parables, Jesus was exhausted. He knew that he needed rest because there was work to do the next day on the opposite shore. Practicality dictated that he should sleep on the boat as they travelled overnight. However, his nap led to a fraught exchange with the disciples. Out of fear, concern and care, the communication became abrasive and each party felt the sting of the other's tongue.

As we join Jesus and the disciples in the boat, consider your own journey through rough seas. Are you the one in need of rest? Are you crying out for support? Are you concerned about the lack of care someone is showing you? Are you frustrated by someone's lack of faith- in you? In God? Let's step into the boat just as we are.

Text

Mark 4:35-41

Jesus Stills a Storm

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, 'Let us go across to the other side.' And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?' He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, 'Peace! Be still!' Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm. He said to them, 'Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?' And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, 'Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?'

Comment

Sudden storms are incredibly common on the Sea of Galilee. It nestles between high hills and narrow valleys that act as wind tunnels. A storm can escalate very quickly given the right conditions. The same can be said of human relationships and communication. The human condition is such that we will always have struggles, whether moral, emotional, physical, psychological or spiritual, and we have to navigate a way through challenging circumstances in our lives. In the midst of stress and strain, how do these trying times impact upon our communication with each other; our speaking and our listening?

This Gospel reading demonstrates how quickly good communication can disintegrate. In the first verses of Mark 4, we learn that the gathered crowd was so large that Jesus used a boat on the lake as a lectern from which to preach. Speaking to the crowd at such a distance would have required both mental and physical exertion, the combination of which must have been exhausting. Jesus and the disciples did not even come ashore before embarking upon their journey across the lake: they simply went from that spot as they were. Jesus was not alone in his tiredness; the disciples had been in the boat with him all day. Perhaps hungry and frustrated, too, they set out for the other side.

I wonder how the disciples felt when Jesus then lay down to sleep. Were they frustrated that they were still expected to work while he rested? Were they questioning the wisdom of setting off at night, when storms were more likely? They were experienced fishermen. They knew the lake and their vessel. Did they enter into the journey with anxiety? I wonder what the disciples were feeling when the storm arose. They had weathered storms before, but they began this journey when their energies were depleted. Were they angry with Jesus for insisting upon the crossing at night? Were they frustrated with Jesus for doing nothing while they were working hard to keep the boat afloat? Were these feelings making them question all that they had been learning about Jesus' identity?

By the time they spoke to Jesus, their frustration had boiled over. Their emotional state caused them to equate him sleeping through the storm with a lack of care for them: "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" They did not wake him up to ask for his help with their effort, to pray or to still the storm. He was woken up with the accusation that he did not care whether they lived or died, which they had inferred from his lack of action without giving him a chance to explain.

As I read Jesus' response, I was taken aback at how much it sounded like a playground argument. 'You don't care about us.' 'You don't believe in me.' Surely the Prince of Peace could have stopped after asking them, "Why are you afraid?" They might have responded by telling him their concerns and asking for his help. Instead, he countered out of his frustration saying, "Have you still no faith?" In that moment, hurt spoke to hurt and they forgot how to communicate well with one another.

In our interpersonal dialogue, good communication is essential. This requires active listening as well as careful speaking. In the practice of Compassionate Listening, it is taught that an individual will communicate at different levels with others, from the superficial to the core, depending upon how comfortable they are, how hurt they have been in the past, and to what degree they are able to lower their defences. If we listen deeply and compassionately, we encourage and enable a person to speak from the heart and take the time to understand the wider context and the emotions present. If we speak at the level of our defences, which we have put up to guard our emotions and core being, then hurt will speak to hurt. Reading the Gospel passage through the lens of conflict, this is how I understand the interaction between the disciples and Jesus. They were all tired and frustrated, and even as they loved one another, they lashed out with their words. If they had been ready to truly listen to one another, the whole scenario might have been less hurtful.

We see in this reading the reality of human vulnerability. We all have the potential to hurt and be hurt and it can happen when we do not intend it. Good communication involves listening to the words being spoken, having an awareness of their context and the assumptions that we might make in response. In the midst of the stresses of daily life, especially within a global pandemic, the practice of active or compassionate listening become even more important, as we listen to ourselves as well as others. If we listen well, perhaps we all carry the potential to calm a storm.

Response

Allow yourself to reflect upon a recent argument or heated discussion. What was the wider context? Was there a direct correlation between how you were feeling and the way in which you were communicating? Did it affect your ability to listen to the other person? Think about how you might adapt your communication in future given these considerations. Finally, forgive yourself – we all get it wrong sometimes.

Prayer

Jesus, you are the man-God.
After a hard day's work, you were in need of rest.
Jesus, you are the God-man.
Even the wind and waves obeyed your commands.
Jesus, you are the man-God.
When the disciples lashed out at your lack of care,
you retorted that they lacked faith.
Jesus, you are the God-man.
You spoke peace to the elements.
You spoke peace to the disciples.
You speak peace to us, even now.
May we know your presence in our boats
as we navigate our storms
and hear your voice
calling us to be still.
Amen.

Further Reading

To find out more about the practice of Compassionate Listening, visit:
compassionatelistening.org