

The Rev. Brooks Cato

As a priest, there are a whole bunch of things I get to do that are really cool. There's showing up wearing a conversation starter around my neck in all sorts of places. That's always fun. Like, a little over a week ago, I went to get my first vaccination shot while wearing a collar. Every person I met opened up, but the best part was when I had to remove my outer layer so they could actually find an arm to administer the shot in. I started the process of pulling off said collar and happened to glance over at the kid from the National Guard sat at my station. He was just staring with this look of "I never thought to wonder how that worked, but now I have SO MANY QUESTIONS!" Or when I get invited into those incredibly intimate moments of your lives, where no one else but family (and sometimes not even them) are allowed to go. I've stood by deathbeds and hospital rooms and those sanitized plastic boxes that stand in for cribs in the NICU. I've been given a key to the village by a mayor, a handful of flowers from a homeless person, a nasty look and a faceful of spit from a mocking bystander. It's not all sunshine and lollipops doing God's work, but it's mostly pretty darn great.

One of my favorite things I get to do, though, is premarital counseling. When two people love each other very much and decide that Christian marriage is the route they'd like to take, I get to meet with them for months ahead of the wedding, and we talk about all sorts of things. But more than anything, what we talk about is talking. Of all the things that will make relationships work or that will break them, clear, transparent communication is paramount. I feel a little bit like I'm preaching to the choir at this red hot moment, but maybe we all need a little bit of a refresher. The thing is, we don't have a lot of good representations of healthy communication in our world. The media we consume, especially television, movies, and literature, rely heavily on bad communication. Bad communication makes for really great storylines, tragic misunderstandings, and occasionally juicy dramatic irony. Can you imagine Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* if all the players had just been open and transparent with each other? It just doesn't work!

Well, lately, Becca and I've been watching this really trashy show on Netflix called *Outlander*. It's ridiculous. Don't watch it. Or do. But consider yourself warned: it is not what I would call, oh what's the word? "Good." It's not really good. But it is very dramatic, so there's that. Funny story: when Fr. Steve and I flew to Jerusalem, he grabbed a book just before the long trans-Atlantic flight to Rome to kill time on the first leg of our trip. It was the *Outlander* book that that show's based on. He spent the entirety of the flight just grumbling at the pages and yelling about how stupid it was. He invested all those hours in the air in this, and then, as soon as we landed and queued up in the Customs line, he reached in his bag and did something he'd never done before or since. He threw the book in the trash. I've never seen anyone do that before or since, and was a little bit horrified. Books are almost sacred themselves, but he just couldn't stand it any longer. I'm telling you, this show based off of that book is not good. All that to say, the drama in it relies heavily on infuriatingly bad communication. Half-truths, secrets kept, just plain forgetting to include a rather consequential detail here and there. As a viewer, it's the kind of thing that makes you yell at the screen. "Oh, come on Claire, tell him! Just tell him what you know!" And then, right at the peak of the season's dramatic climax, the truth comes out, and there's one kind of explosion or another. The formula works because it's interesting, but it's not a great model for sustainable human relationship.

But now that I've noticed it, I'm seeing it everywhere. There are so many tragic moments in the stories we tell that could've been avoided if people would just talk to each other, even when, no, especially when the subject matter is uncomfortable. That's where real life happens, but our entertainment shows us pretty much the worst ways to go about it. Of course, this isn't a new thing. I mentioned Shakespeare earlier, but it even predates him. Go all the way back to Jesus clearing out the Temple grounds, and you've got another example. Now, I don't want to presume to fault the Son of God on his communication skills, but we have heard enough

from him by now to know that he isn't particularly interested in tact. Here, he's just run around with a handmade whip, disrupting the way things are done at the holiest site in all of Judaism, and he says, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up." Now, to anyone that's been paying attention up until now in the whole arc of the story, maybe you can figure out that he's talking about himself, but the folks he's chasing around don't know that. After all, the Temple itself has been in the process of being rebuilt for nigh on 50 years by now, and this redneck with a whip and a touchy attitude says he could do better in just three days' time. One, it's ridiculous. Two, it's insulting. And three, they're pretty sure it's blasphemous. Now, if you missed the metaphor, don't feel bad. Apparently, the author of John thinks the metaphor isn't terribly clear, either, and goes ahead and includes an explanatory note to unpack Jesus' confusing statement. He wasn't talking about the Temple, he was talking about his Body.

Now, I know that I am not always the clearest communicator. I try to be understood, but sometimes I just miss the mark. A few years ago, after my second grandmother died, someone asked how I was holding up, and I said, "Well, I'm alright. I don't think it's really hit me yet 'cause I just keep my head down, bottle it up, and try to find some normalcy, *'cause that's a good thing to do.*" I knew that what I was doing wasn't great, but I was being honest. I figured the way I said that last bit would make it clear, but the person I was talking with completely missed the sarcasm and spent a good while talking about how, no, it isn't a good thing and I as a priest should've dealt with enough grief to know better. I wish I'd had the wherewithal to say something to clarify just then, but I didn't. And I wish that Jesus there on the Temple grounds had corrected those who misunderstood him, but he didn't. Instead, he let it go, and he went about his business. The thing is, after I had my conversation with that person, it sort of ended there. (At least, I think it did. If you're out there, hi! Sorry I read that moment wrong!) But for Jesus, it didn't end there. See, his story continues, and this moment becomes that tragic misunderstanding, that time where, if you zoom in, you could pinpoint the communication breakdown that will lead to so much tragedy in the story.

When Jesus is arrested and brought to trial, one of the charges against him isn't that he thrashed around at the Temple. No, it's what he said. That he could tear down the Temple and rebuild it in three days. The explanatory "he wasn't talking about the *actual* Temple, he was talking about his body" isn't there because they didn't know. Maybe you could make an argument that they did this in good faith and were freaked out, or maybe you could make an argument that they knew they were being deceptive and did it anyway. But regardless, the little sidebar we get in the text, they didn't have. And for this failure in communication, the cross rises on the horizon. It's funny, funny in a tragic sense, that this is how it all goes down. That Jesus, known for his ability to draw immense crowds as a great orator, would meet his downfall because of something his audience assumed they understood. They got it wrong, gravely wrong, and yet, somehow, Christ will overcome even this stumbling block to deliver a greater message still. That while death may come, it has no claim on him, and through him, it has no claim on us.

I wonder, these days, what assumptions about Christ are being made by folks outside of the church. I wonder what assumptions are made about our God, about our story, or even about us? And I wonder what we could do about those assumptions. I wonder what we could do to hear them and, if need be, correct them before the cross rises for us? God knows, in all those places my backstage pass of a collar takes me, I do a whole lot of correcting misunderstood assumptions. No, I don't think God sent that squall last Monday to test my faith. No, I don't think COVID-19 is a sign of God's judgment. No, I don't think the vaccine is The Mark of the Beast. In other words, I wonder what misunderstandings, what misinformed assumptions people in our village have about us. And I wonder what we could do to better communicate what we're about. We know from the stories we tell that bad communication makes for interesting plot lines, but we know from real life that good communication actually keeps relationships alive, and healthy, and fruitful. Whether it's easy to see or not, we have

relationships with every soul in this geographical area. And we need to be conversing with them, each and every one. I do, but so do you. Us crazy Christians in that brown church on Madison Street get up to some crazy stuff. It's time to be clear with folks what we're about.

Just in case my communicatin' isn't clear, what do I mean by "what we're about?" As painful as it can be to acknowledge, we're about the cross. We're about the recognition of the reality of, and I love the way the psalms put this, "presumptuous sin," and we're about the grace of forgiveness when sin shows up. We're about long arcs of stories of God reaching out in love to God's people. Look at Exodus, and you'll find a distilled version of everything we stand for. Those 10 Commandments, Lord knows there's some misunderstanding there, even some odd politicization, but distilled down, you have two things: how to love God, and how to love your neighbor. That's it. That's what we're about. We love God. We love our neighbor. Without qualification. Without explanatory commas. Without parentheticals. Love God. Love your neighbor. That's the story we have to tell. And God knows, it's a story that needs telling. Love God. Love your neighbor. Do not be misunderstood. Don't be misconstrued. Just tell the truth, the whole truth, that while our story as Christians is both immensely simple and unimaginably complex, it comes down to just this. Love God. Love your neighbor.