

Year C, Proper 20
 19 September 2010
 Trinity Anglican Church

In 2000, I was a newly ordained priest serving at Holy Comforter Church in Tallahassee, first baptismal preparation. Mother – former Catholic. Father – former Baptist. Wondered how it would go, coming from very different traditions (one used to children being baptized, one not, etc.). Before we got started going through the Baptismal service, they asked if they could first ask about something else. At the Eucharist, what do you think is happening when you consecrate the bread and wine into the sacramental elements of Christ’s body and blood? I hadn’t prepped for that one! I told them that in the Anglican tradition there is quite a breadth of understanding of what is actually happening at that moment. For some it is a memorial meal, remembering what Jesus did for us. For others, the bread and wine are actually becoming body and blood. I told them that I fit somewhere in the middle. I didn’t know exactly what the Lord was doing as I consecrated the elements, but something was happening, and the Lord was present in them. “That’s OK,” they said, “We don’t need to know exactly what you thought was happening. We just needed to hear you say that you thought something was happening. You see, I work for the Sherriff’s office, and he works for the Police Department. We’re both trained in observing people. It is important for us to be spiritually led by someone who’s posture and body language agrees with what they’re saying. When you stand behind the altar, your posture is different than it is when we’re talking casually and it is different when you’re standing behind the pulpit. Your body language tells us that you know something significant is happening. We just needed to hear you say it. Now, let’s talk about baptism.”

Non-verbal v. verbal communication only

- Tone of voice, inflection = 38%
- Facial expression = 55%
- Words you say = 7%

If the cues disagree, which will you believe?

Limits of technology for communicating. Can’t hear tone of voice over email or text message – even if you use capital letters and smiley faces. As a sensory person, I get a lot of clues about what someone else is really trying to communicate through all the non-verbal clues. My children soon learned to leave voice mail messages on the machine for me to listen to directly. I did not want to hear, “Ms. Janice called.” I got a whole lot more information by listening to her voice on the machine.

I've been reading a book called Blink by Malcolm Gladwell. Blink looks at the phenomena that our brains have this amazing capacity to make accurate judgments in a split second of time. There are lots of stories to illustrate it. One was a tennis coach. In the split second before a tennis player's second serve he could accurately predict whether they would double-fault or not. In great detail he shows how in a very short time, some people can watch a couple interact and accurately determine whether or not their marriage will last. Another one that caught my attention was that without hearing the words that were spoken by surgeons to their patients as well as not knowing the illness and efficacy of treatment, it was clear which doctors would likely be sued at some point in their career and which would not. If the surgeon's voice was judged to sound dominant, the surgeon tended to be in the sued group. If the voice sounded less dominant and more concerned, the surgeon tended to be in the non-sued group. In the end it came down to a matter of respect, and the simplest way that respect was communicated was through tone of voice.

Last week Jim talked about being sent – being seekers. Finding those who were out there who needed us. Our tangible kingdom book uses the word missional. We participate in the work of Jesus to take his message of the Kingdom of love and care to those who are yet to be drawn to his love and care.

But it does not do much good to go, to be sent, unless we do it in a way that is consistent with the message. I'm afraid with the baptismal parents I was talking to, if I had said, "It really doesn't matter what happens as the elements are consecrated" when they could see my body language indicated otherwise, we may not have gotten around to the baptismal preparation. They may have needed to get that from someone else, whose words and actions matched.

So, yes, we are sent. Yes, we are seekers. But very closely tied to that is how we go about it. Week 2 of the Tangible Kingdom books we are studying in our small groups uses the word Incarnational. We usually think of the word "Incarnation" around Advent and Christmas – Jesus leaves the majesty of heaven where he reigns as King of kings and Lord of lords, and takes on human flesh and is born as a helpless baby. The incarnation – "God with us." John 1:14 "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Incarnation is about posture. It is making sure that everything about us matches the message we speak.

All too often, though, we see examples of people who are actually hurting the gospel message by the way they are trying to communicate it. How does it feel to see the "umbrella lady" standing at the corner of Jackson and Route 19 with her "Turn or Burn" message written in big letters on the umbrella? I don't like it. In fact, I'm embarrassed by it. That's not helpful to the cause of the Kingdom, in my humble opinion. That is not the kind of Christian I want to be associated with.

Neither do I want to be compared to the Quran-burning pastor in Gainesville. Both of those postures feel more like the Pharisees, than the Jesus I know and love.

We are sent, but it matters how we are sent. What is our posture? Is it pride and arrogance or humility?

Pride, arrogance	Humility
Aloof	Present – sharing life, “doing life” together
Judgment	Love
Enemy	Advocate
“Truth” only	Truth wrapped in love
Verbal/non-verbal dissonance	Verbal/non-verbal agreement
Obscure message	Clarify message
Accuse	Gently convict
Repelling God’s presence	Being God’s presence
“Churchy” tone of voice	Real tone of voice
Fix person from perceived superiority	Soul to soul connection and care
Don’t let your need touch me, I don’t need you	Meet in need, we all need
Only “give”	Balanced “give and take”
Position	Relationship
Use people	Be with people

Let me share a story with you. Friends of ours, who lived in Zimbabwe at the time, lost a child. They experienced both types of responses, all by well-meaning folk. Granted, it is hard sometimes to know what to say or what not to say in those tough moments when you want to show you care and words feel so inadequate. Some came by and tried to share something that would make them feel better. “In time you’ll get over it.” “Maybe you can have another child.” Sometimes we don’t know how to share our hearts in the midst of those situations. But one older woman came in with a very different posture. She came in and didn’t say anything, she just sat over in the corner and cried. Her posture acknowledged the intensity of the pain, and was willing to engage with them in that pain. Her presence brought more comfort than anyone else. Later they asked her about it. She said, with every grief there are a certain amount of tears to be shed. When I cry with you, you will get through your grief faster.

Last night Jim and I watched a movie called “Dangerous Minds.” Michelle Pfeiffer plays a woman who goes into an inner city high school. It is pretty rough at first, but she sticks it out. She shows them she loves them and cares for them. In many ways she becomes the only advocate they have. Her posture says it all, I’m going to be with you, I’ll visit in your home if you are absent, after I’ve gained your trust, I’ll open your mind and heart to different possibilities for your life.

What is the posture of Jesus? He left heaven to become a helpless baby, with real needs, just like ours. He knows what it feels like to grieve, to have pain, to hunger. How does he interact with others? This week we'll be spending some time reflecting on how Jesus interacts with the Woman Caught in Adultery in John 8. Notice his posture. The Pharisees are ready for him to agree that she needs to be stoned to fulfill the Law of Moses. Jesus bends down to connect with her. He begins to write in the dirt on the ground and gradually the accusers leave, one by one. How do we "bend down" to connect with others? It's a Kingdom posture. It's sitting in the corner crying in the midst of the grief around us. Jesus tells us he is not just the truth and the life, he is the way. It matters how we share the truth. Do we bring others into the Kingdom of Light and Life, or does our message confuse and distract?

Take a minute to look over the Gospel lesson. Two separate Sabbath stories. In each case, the Pharisees are watching Jesus, waiting for him to do what was not allowed on the Sabbath, so they could accuse him. Each time, both in the grain field and healing the man with the shriveled right hand, Jesus does what they are hoping he does. But in each case he shows them how what he has done is more important than the Sabbath laws. Can you see the posture of both of them? Jesus is out walking, interacting – being – with his disciples. The Pharisees are close enough to see what is going on without being able to be accused of participating.

We have the most amazing love story to tell. Jesus loves me enough that he left heaven to stoop down to be with me personally. He dies to save me from my sin. He comes to life in victory and now sits at the Father's right hand in heaven praying for me!! It's awesome. I want to be so transformed by that love that that is what others see and experience through me – in the midst of the pain and brokenness of all our lives. We grieve, but not without hope. We know this is not the end of the story. The gospel makes a difference in my life. I want to communicate that message to others but in a way that says, "I care" not "I'm better than you."

Both Peter and Paul give us instructions about how to do this. Both men had experienced the humility of Jesus in the midst of the broken places of their lives. Their broken places are not kept a secret from us. Maybe they were such powerful leaders because God worked through that broken, now healed, part of them.

Listen to what Peter says: "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect" (1 Peter 3:15). Peter says we need to give an answer. We need to be able to share with our words. But it matters how we go about that – gentleness and respect are Kingdom words.

How about Paul? He says this: “As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel but our lives as well, because you had become dear to us” (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8).

Maybe like many of you, I have been wondering how to work out the action days of the Tangible Kingdom book. Who is God leading me to bless with his love, “along the way” of my life? My neighbors that I don’t know well yet? Someone that God is going to bring to my path? Then I realized something. There is someone in this town that I’ve had the opportunity to interact with during some pretty hard times in her life. Her background is very different than mine yet she has a lot to teach me about being real. She’s from a different generation than I am. Her posture and her words match better than mine do a lot of the time. Almost every day she texts me, wanting to interact. God has already set me up with this wonderful opportunity to love her. Maybe the Lord will use me to woo her into the Kingdom, wouldn’t that be cool? Many days I don’t have time to drop things and spend time with her. But there are plenty of other times that I do have time, but I don’t think about it. There’s something else to do. I have been challenged, through the Tangible Kingdom work that we are doing, that responding to her and taking some initiative in our relationship is Kingdom work and it is right in front of me. I didn’t have to go looking for it. This relationship happened “on the way” to other things.

We are being sent on a mission. For me, right now, that does not mean across the country or across the globe. I am sent to a home across town, to do normal, everyday things. But I want to do that with the right posture – a posture that says I’m willing to do this life stuff with you, whatever that means. If I do that, the results are really not my business. I can trust that our incarnational God will take care of that.

Let’s pray.