

**“Saying the Right Thing”**

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Transfiguration, Year A, Revised Common Lectionary

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**Readings**

Exodus 24:12–18; Psalm 99;  
2 Peter 1:16–21; Matthew 17:1–9

It is always challenging to know the right thing to say.

In meetings or other gatherings it can be tempting to say nothing, just in case the something we say should turn out to be something stupid.

In front of groups of people, trusting ourselves to say the right thing may seem presumptuous, because what can any of us say that will apply to all people? This task of mine right now is one imbued with as much fear as it is audacity, but I'll get to that in a moment.

One on one, it can be tough to know what one should say, since saying the *wrong* thing may do more harm than good.

There is only one thing more discomfiting for most people than trying to figure out what to say when we're with other people, and that is trying to figure out what to say when we're with God. Praying can really put you off the map. Doing it out loud in a group can feel unnatural, and you'll wonder whether you're saying it for yourself, for God, or for the group you're with. Doing it alone can be baffling and awkward, especially if it's part of a devotional assignment rather than something just bursting forth from within.

And there are times when it can be difficult to know when to say nothing at all.

Jesus, after the Transfiguration, advised Peter, James, and John to say nothing about the event until after he had been raised.

Can you keep a secret? Can you maintain a confidence? Should you? After all, as it is said in Ecclesiastes, there is “A time to keep silent and a time to speak.” How do you discern which is which?

How do you determine the right thing to say, or even when to say nothing? How do you know?

And even when you think it might be the right time to speak, there's always the chance that – even though you've said something that you intended to be good and kind – it will get twisted around and interpreted in ways you never meant to say. Or something you may do, some gesture that you may have made, without thinking at the same time as you were speaking, is misinterpreted.

All of this tends to make ordinary people start acting like the White House press office, speaking guardedly if at all about matters of importance! I cannot tell you the number of times I have been speaking with ordinary people in complete confidence and, when a matter of some sensitivity comes up, they have responded, “No comment.”

I'll admit, lately we all have been a little on edge. Our society, American society, yes, but Western society generally, has gotten itself pretty entrenched, left and right. The liberal media and the conservative media have generated this, a great deal, I believe.

I experienced this in the community I just came from. If I preached and used a timely illustration, something from the news, people on the left imagined that when I would say things that appeared to criticize the government that I agreed with them. Meanwhile, people on the right heard me saying things that they thought were disparaging the federal administration and

took offense.

And no matter how hard I might try to tell folk otherwise, that I don't care one wit who the President is, they were dubious. No matter how I would stress to them, that I have to work just as hard regardless of whether the President is a Republican or a Democrat, a moralist or a civil libertarian; they thought that when I would say that God has shown special favor for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the outcast, or that business should be conducted less with competition in mind than with mercy, I must have been saying that I was favoring one political side over the other.

But I really do not see the advantage of one political party in power over the other, anymore. So, if you someday either only hear me preach or lecture you about the wrongness of your side, or else you only perceive me to congratulate the rightness of your side and you're not feeling somehow uncomfortable with my message, well, either you're not paying attention or I'm a pretty second-rate preacher.

Because if that turns out to be the case, then somehow, I'm not saying the right thing.

Or maybe I'm saying it, but it's not getting heard. The filters that we have had to turn on in order to receive reliable information from the outside world, might need to get turned off within these halls, in order to receive the faith-filled information God is sending us – through me, through you, through us being together.

It will be incumbent upon us, during our time together, to create a place of social and emotional safety among us, a people of relatively neutral politicality, so that messages from the Spirit can come through, so that love may be shared and community enjoyed and engaged. This kind of filter removal and reorientation is not easy, I'll admit. To survive nowadays, it really is necessary to guard ourselves with protective boundaries and devices – even mental or spiritual ones.

I mostly blame air conditioning. I know that sounds like a non sequitur, but I mean it. Have you noticed that people don't sit out on porches as much anymore? In fact, when was the last time a building contractor anywhere built a house with a decent porch on it?

Do you know why we don't have porches anymore? Because it's cooler inside in the summertime when, otherwise, we'd be hanging out there for the sake of catching a breeze. And I suppose it's nice that it's cooler inside nowadays, but being inside means that you only have to interact with the people you want to interact with. . . the people you permit to enter your door. Everybody else stays outside. The result is that you don't have to greet or even speak at any length with people you don't like, or who disagree with you.

You don't get to meet new people, either. But at least you don't have to learn new behaviors, don't have to adapt to any expectations but your own and those of your own interest group. . . don't have to worry about what to do if you say the wrong thing. . . don't have to worry that someone is going to say the wrong thing to you, and put you through the challenge of explaining yourself.

Given the proper environmental controls, there is no real reason for ever receiving callers at all. Theoretically at least, in our modern world with the conveniences of internet and modern transportation, it is possible for one to live entirely insulated from moderating influences.

Close in the porches, make them sunrooms, and turn on the blessed A/C. But don't expect a sympathetic ear from me when your children won't play outside.

In our homes with our TVs and our radios and our computers, we let the media define the parameters of our conversations, our politics. We can ignore those people who aren't like us. . . until we get to church. And, then, there they are.

In this world of isolation, *we* belong to a church which has (in true Congregational form)

elected to popularize itself by proclaiming the novelty of extravagant welcome. You see it at the beginning of the worship order:

*We are open and affirming to people of all ages, abilities, races,  
sexual orientations and national origins.*

Fine, just fine. Let 'em come, I suppose.

But no wonder we worry about what to say to each other, or even to God!, when it comes time for something to be said. We're trying not to offend the young or the old, the rich or the poor or those in the middle, the Republicans or Democrats, heterosexuals or homosexuals or bisexuals or transgendered persons, the black or white or brown or yellow, or any of the people who have sat down near us. We've been busy creating little niches, our own little corners of the world, as if we need some sort of refuge from the people next door. And then, we go to church. This church, with its wide welcome!

Perhaps with Peter clearly saying the wrong thing – or just speaking too soon, here – we might bear in mind the fact that he did at least say something. And we can bear even more strongly in mind that Jesus didn't scold or condemn him for his blurt (“Maybe *you* should build three shrines?! Who's the carpenter here?”), didn't reprimand the others for keeping silent, didn't criticize all three of them for being afraid. He simply went over to them, when the moment was finished, touched them (I assume, comfortingly), and offered the advice that the timing of this epiphany for them would be best left until later for discussion.

That's because part of his example of perfection was Jesus' wisdom about when to say and do the right thing.

However, it is not as though we have no access to that wisdom ourselves. Jesus in the fourteenth chapter of John talks a lot about the Holy Spirit and the words that a Christian may need. To summarize, I'll tell you, he says, “Don't worry about what to say. I'll give you my Spirit, and you'll say the right thing.” John revealed Jesus at the last supper to be one who was comforting, and at the same time distressing, his friends – just the way Matthew in our reading today portrayed Jesus first distressing them and then comforting them. In both gospels, he did this while furthermore predicting that they would have the ability to comfort and distress others, someday, by that same Spirit through which he found wisdom.

And through the ages, when the Church has been at our best, this is what we have been about, especially when we are together. Say the right thing, and there is challenge and blessing; say the wrong thing, and there is grace and a measure of comfort.

We are obliged to offer the Good News – to speak truth to power, to speak truth to the disenfranchised, to lift up the miserable, to encourage one another, to offer a vision.

And yet we allow artificial barriers – media that stroke and salve our wounded self-righteousness, walls between properties, even something as simple as climate controls in our homes – to separate us from one another. You know, I've heard of times when people ignored the differences in favor of the similarities, because they had to live together. They depended on one another for mutual support and for hearing the Good News.

It's an uphill battle to find the right thing to say, even to hear the right thing being spoken to us. Peter realized this on a mountaintop in a profound way; and he and John and James were struck dumb with fear, when the right word came to them all at once. A natural reaction to the epiphany granted us when we see the Law and the Prophets fulfilled in the person of the Good News, is fear. What if we say the wrong thing? What if we don't know what to say?

I'd offer the advice, in light of the Transfiguration, that there can be times when it is important to say the right thing, other times when you might want to be sure to avoid saying the

wrong thing. But most of all what we want to do, as people seeking to emulate Jesus' faith and perhaps even his wisdom, especially when we are gathered in Jesus' community, is to recognize who it is speaking to us when we are certainly in God's presence, to pay attention, and to offer (forward and back) the word we have been given... the purpose we have found... the love we have come to know.

Thus supplied, how can we fail to say the right thing?

Amen.