

James 1:17-20a
“Optimal Church Communication: Closing the Loop”
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Fourth Sunday after Pentecost & Father’s Day, June 20, 2021

Introduction:

Children and adults, please give attention to the Bible reading. It is a letter from James to the church. He gives Christians good advice about how to communicate in such a way that builds up the church.

Reading:

¹⁷ Every good action and every perfect gift is from God. These good gifts come down from the Creator of the sun, moon, and stars. God does not change like their shifting shadows. ¹⁸ God decided to give us life through the word of truth. God wanted us to be the most important of all the things he made.

¹⁹ My dear brothers and sisters, always be willing to listen and slow to speak. Do not become angry easily. ²⁰ Anger will not help you live a good life as God wants.

This past Wednesday, Steve and I marked our 43rd wedding anniversary. Yes, that’s a long time! But we are kept humble by the story of another, older couple, more hard-of-hearing than we are, who were married for *sixty* years. At their celebration, the husband leaned over and whispered to his wife, “I love you!” His wife replied, “I’m tired of you too!”

Communication doesn’t always work! Intended messages sometimes fail. This may not be a big deal during a game of “Telephone,” but it can have tragic consequences in other situations. For instance, in Shakespeare’s masterpiece, *Romeo & Juliet*, Friar Laurence’s messenger from Verona couldn’t get out of town due to a plague, so Romeo didn’t get the message that his beloved, Juliet, wasn’t really dead. Then, an example from our time: as the science about COVID evolved, the CDC nuanced their public health message, but not everyone heard or believed it. Communication doesn’t always work.

Particularly relevant *this* weekend: the Juneteenth holiday came about because of a problem with communication. Lincoln made his *Emancipation Proclamation* in 1863, but there were barriers. The wording of this text is ponderous; it also wasn’t clear that the proclamation applied to Border States; the Confederate slaveholders who had moved to Texas because there wasn’t much Union presence were not at all inclined to obey the law, and the war had not concluded. No wonder Lincoln’s communication failed there!

So emancipation wasn’t heard in Texas until Union troops and General Granger came to Galveston Bay, June 19, 1865. Using more straightforward words, he declared: “The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free.” There was still resistance to overcome among those in power, of course, but the word of freedom had finally been heard, provoking great jubilation among the formerly enslaved and their allies; giving birth to Juneteenth.

God certainly knows how risky it is to send out the message of love and justice! Over multiple attempts and through different means, even *God* has experienced trouble getting the Word across to us. Embodying the message in Jesus, the Christ, God ran into hard-of-hearing and hostile human beings. We didn't get it!

Jesus Christ knew that the church, too, would be challenged by communication. So the Holy Spirit put it upon the heart of James to help us. In verse 19 of this letter, he exhorts us to be quick to listen, slow to speak, and not to give in easily to unproductive anger. **This is a 'quick, slow, slow' choreography, if you will, to facilitate optimal church communication.**

This past week, I think we noticed aspects of this kind of 'dance' between President Biden, Vladimir Putin, the Press, and our citizenry. They used diplomacy to listen more than they spoke and in order to experience less conflict and more understanding. Chances are, *you've* done this dance too as a parent. How many of you learned how to hold family listening meetings in place of quick, alienating confrontations? Quick, slow, slow is a better spiritual rhythm!

And the Holy Spirit has given the church still another important practice, what I call: "Closing the Loop." When a sender conveys a message to a receiver, the best results are more likely to come if either one takes the extra slow dance step of confirming that the message has been received. In other words, if the receiver repeats back what was heard, the sender can say, "Yes," or "No" and clarify, until true, two-way understanding is achieved. This completes the loop of transmission.

You can probably already see how this discipline would improve the 'dance' of *church* communication. For example, when a congregation faces big questions of social justice, big projects like accessibility, and big decisions such as its next pastor, the climate can be tense as well as exciting. Closing the Loop as we discuss things can at first slow down the process at hand, but ultimately it makes it more efficient and constructive. When congregations take time to double-check what they are saying and hearing, *inside* their meetings and *outside* with their neighbors, they hold the relationship with God and each other first; they don't burn bridges, but build on sound pillars. When congregants also take care to Close the Loop by answering emails and following up on tasks, this kind of communication also keeps them in sync and moving forward on God's work.

It's probably also obvious that when we are visiting with one another in the church, trying to show that we care, Closing the Loop really makes a difference! If a fellow parishioner mentions that he is more than normally busy at work, you can acknowledge that you have heard this message by repeating it back in different words and by asking an open-ended, related question like: "Oh? What makes this a busy time?" You will then have communicated understanding and compassion, the sort that opens the door to further exchange and helps you both to grow in Christ.

Closing the Loop is absolutely essential to cross-cultural dialogue, as well, especially in the church. It helps us *not* assume that our experience, say mine as a white middle-class pastor, is the same as that of a middle-class person of color working in a similar field. Listening and repeating back in different words what we have heard will check our presumptions, open our eyes, increase our understanding, and forge a measure of mutual trust across difference, the kind of cultural competence that a diverse church like RCC really needs!

"I love you," she said. "I love you too," came the response. Let's Close the Loop, so we can celebrate the Good News together!