

“Seek the Kingdom of God”

One of the great advances of our age is electronic communication. Telephone, email and texting along with programs like Face Time and Skype have revolutionized the way we communicate with each other. This technology is not just for the powerful and wealthy, nearly every human being has access to this kind of communication.

However, along with these great leaps in communication is the loss of nuance and intent. This is especially true with email and texting. In these communication platforms we write words to each other, but the recipient does not have the advantage of hearing our voice, seeing facial expressions or seeing body language. They just see the words. In a previous age when people wrote letters the writer was careful to communicate nuance and intent through the use of words. But in our current age and with this technology what most often happens is that we write the message the way we would say it. But we fail to communicate the tone and expression in the accompanying text. What so often happens is the recipient reads the message and is not sure what the writer meant. Or worse the recipient misinterprets the writers meaning and is offended.

Imagine your friend or loved one writes you to let you know that she has lost the tickets to the concert. You respond with the words, “That’s great.” Without being able to hear your voice she could be left thinking you are glad that the tickets were lost, because you did not want to go. Or that you are upset and disgusted that she was so careless. This is a simple example. The opportunity for miscommunication is myriad.

Another problem with written communication is the reader’s perception. For example, if I am reading that same email and I know you are always sarcastic I will take your response as sarcastic. If I think you are perky and optimistic, I might take your response as positive. But what if you are not feeling so perky and you really are angry or if today sarcasm is failing you. The reader’s preconception may also lead her to misinterpret your message.

This problem is not limited to modern communication. Take today’s gospel reading as an example. Jesus tells a parable about a man who when confronted with the possibility of losing his job connives with the people who owe his boss money to reduce their bills and thereby curry favor with them so that when he is out of a job they will owe him a favor. The story is not the problem so much as what Jesus says after the parable. “Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.”

If we read this line the same way we do when we read the Beatitudes or the Lord’s Prayer we get very stuck. We hear Jesus commending dishonesty and cheating. That goes against so much of Jesus’ teaching. So many

commentators I read went through the twists and turns of pretzel logic in order to make Jesus mean something different.

What if instead of reading those words straight we were to read them as if Jesus were being sarcastic? Instead of making it sound like a command from Jesus we might hear it like this. “Make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes.” If we hear it this way it actually is not so discordant with Jesus’ teaching.

With this inflection we hear Jesus telling us that being dishonest might buy you friends but it is no guarantee of anything else. What your friends, true or bought, have to offer is only temporary. Indeed we all know that when wealth is gone “friends” are often hard to find. The eternal home they might welcome us into is not eternal at all. It is as fleeting as the wind. The only true eternal home is in the heart of God.

Cheating, lying, libeling, currying favor, name calling, and other despicable tactics make get us a temporary advantage and temporary friends. Yet, nearly every day we hear of a powerful person whose attachment to power or wealth has slipped. We then hear how their friends deny their friendship or even knowing them.

This brings us to the prophet Amos, who was driven by God to prophesy against the northern kingdom of Israel. He reminds those Israelites and us that seeking money and earnings is against God’s will. Whether it is being anxious for the Sabbath to end so that we can start selling again, cheating our customers with false weights and measures, taking advantage of the poor, or selling what should be trash and not suitable for human consumption. Despite God’s injunction as delivered by Amos twenty-nine centuries ago we are still at it.

Whether the message is delivered by a humble arborist and cattle herder or an itinerant carpenter and rabbi from Galilee or the latest social justice advocate, the message is the same. Money, power, and privilege do not fill the void in our hearts. Taking advantage of the poor, the weak, and the needy do not improve our lot but rob us of the abundant life we long for. The real abundant life is a life lived seeking God and caring for those whom human avarice has robbed of the essentials of life such as adequate food, shelter and perhaps most importantly hope.

Let us not fall into the trap that led the people of the northern kingdom to require a prophet. Let us not fall into the trap of the rich man who fired his steward, only to praise his dishonesty. Let us not fall into the trap of the steward who put his faith in purchased friends. All of them were fooled by the false security of money. Only in God’s love can we truly find a home eternally welcoming and life abundant without ceasing.