23rd Sunday (Labor Day): Stressing the Point

Do you ever have trouble getting someone to hear what you are saying? You just can’t seem to get through? It’s a killer, isn’t it? Well, it doesn’t LITERALLY kill us. That’s a figure of speech, a hyperbole, and there is a hint to understanding this Gospel. We use hyperbole, exaggeration or stating things in the extreme all the time, as a way to effectively communicate.

For one reason, when we are trying to get through to someone, first we have to get their attention. Often folks are so wrapped up in their own thoughts, just getting their attention is tough. Then, we have to get past this problem: others often think they already know what we are going to say, so they are half tuned-out, or busy thinking how to respond before they even hear what we have to say. Overcome that obstacle, and then if we are saying something they don’t want to hear, selective hearing kicks in. Familiar with that one? They may be able to repeat our words exactly, but they still don’t really get it. It’s a miracle communication ever works!

Thank God, we have a whole tool box of ways to overcome the obstacles in communicating. Today, let me just speak about one set of tools: figures of speech. Having lived with both priests and seminarians who were not native speakers of English, I gained a whole new appreciation of how many figures of speech, idioms, and colloquial expressions we use all the time. Many make no sense if you take them literally, yet they get the message across perfectly. “Have you ever said “its raining cats and dogs”?

Let me call upon my dear departed mom for another example. Having being raised in a traditional German home, my paternal grandmother was very frugal. Occasionally my mom would try to get her to see she was really being cheap. So she would say “you know, you can’t have pockets in your shroud.” That was using Baptist imagery perhaps. I guess using more Catholic theology, you could say “Your baptismal garment didn’t come with pockets.” Or “your wedding garment at the final banquet won’t have pockets.” Now my grandmother understood perfectly well what mom meant, even though we don’t have any precise description of attire in the afterlife. In fact, here is a biblical image of attire in the afterlife, not to be taken literally “They have washed their robes making them white in the blood of the lamb.” Back to the point, my mom’s expression about no pockets in our shroud was clear, effective communication, a wise insight, but not literal. My grandmother wasn’t tempted in the least to shop and make sure she couldn’t find a shroud with pockets. I’ll come back to this in a minute.

Well if you think we have trouble communicating with each other, think of the challenge God faces trying to get through to us! First God has to get our attention, beyond on the preoccupations that can keep us distracted. God has great ways of doing that … just ask almost any committed disciple! Just as we do, God has to get beyond our thinking we know what God is revealing, when we think we already know the story. Often God communicates to give us new ways of seeing and living in the world, ways that require us getting beyond our prejudices and pre-conceived ideas, ways that require conversion. There in lies a good reason for selective hearing to kick in. It is no wonder God has had to rely on figures of speech, just like we do every day. In fact, there are over 200 kinds of figures of speech in the Bible! There are simile’s, metaphors, irony, word plays, euphemisms’, personification, hyperbole, to name just a few.
Here is one reason why it is important for parents to make sure their kids are receiving religious education. A child can begin early in life with an innocent, beautiful, instinctive sense of God. They can begin to pray, and have a budding relationship with Jesus once they learn a little about him. But if they start to read more of the Bible without some guidance, or if an atheist tries to convince them that the Bible is full of contradictions, that same child, as a teen or young adult, can be led astray, losing their faith. For instance, an atheist might say: “hey, one day Jesus says love your enemies, then he says hate your family. It’s crazy. How can anyone take Jesus seriously?”

Adults can get confused as well, especially with passages like the one we just heard, if we don’t keep learning, don’t work at understanding the Bible, and don’t come to discover that God communicates in just as many ways as we do, ways that are figurative, or poetic, but not always literal. Taking everything to be LITERAL truth puts our faith on very shaky ground, and keeps us from recognizing how precious non-literal truth can be. Much of the Bible is poetry. We can’t read the Bible intelligently without understanding that figures of speech are a vital way of communicating truth, and that God and the human authors God inspired depended on the same tool box we use to communicate in everyday life; figures of speech, including hyperbole.

When Jesus said “the Pharisees swallow a camel but strain out a gnat,” were there any Pharisees around swallowing camels? NO! That’s an easy one. “If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out?” Let’s face it, if that demand were taken literally, either there would be no Christians, or we would all be blind, bumping into walls. Today’s hyperbole is easier to misunderstand, but think about it. Why would Jesus say we should hate our family? Throughout the Gospels and the New Testament, we see love in word and deed on every page!

Ok, he was on his way to Jerusalem, and his passion. Think. If he put his mother first when in the garden of Gethsemane, the agony in the garden, things may have gone much differently. Thinking about the pain the coming events would cause his mother, he might have chosen instead to head over the Mount of Olives and escape into the desert – that might save his mother having her heart pierced with a sword (another biblical figure of speech). He had to put his mission first in order to save us all. Did he hate Mary, ignoring the pain she would experience and thinking just of himself? Of course not. But did his mission have to come first? Yes.

Like most hyperbole, the opening of our Gospel expresses extreme conviction. It grabs our attention. It makes us think by jarring us. Is Jesus truly advocating hate? No! He is telling us that to be his disciples, we have to realize that the most important relationship in our life is with him. He was about to give his very life for us. About to embrace the hardest decision anyone could ever have to make. Of course he was being passionate. He knew first hand that the most important choices we have to make often require putting the immediate comfort of others, and even ourselves, aside. So he tells us, let our relationship with him, and the paschal mystery guide us, come first. Do that, and to pull in those other metaphors in today’s Gospel, we will be able to complete constructing the tower, because we will know the cost. We will make peace terms with the king …
Let me wrap up, going back to that first figure of speech from my mom. Our baptismal garment doesn’t have pockets. We use figures of speech in our prayers, just as they are used in life and in the Bible. So in the baptismal rite: “You have become a new creation, and have clothed yourselves in Christ. See in this white garment the outward sign of your Christian dignity. .... Bring that dignity unstained into the everlasting life of heaven.” So our baptismal garment will be our shroud. Figuratively, it is our daily garment, as each day we ‘clothe ourselves in Christ’, we begin the day “putting on Christ”. It is how we come dressed (figuratively again) to celebrating Eucharist, and it is how we will be dressed when we enter the kingdom. But no pockets. A great image, given the last line of our Gospel. “Anyone who does not renounce all of his possessions cannot be my disciple.” Hyperbole? Literal command? Are we all supposed to hear this, rent a truck on the way home, get all of our belongs and bring them to Saints Place? I don’t think so. But it does communicate a vital truth extremely well. Possessions can weigh us down. Detachment can set us free. “Renouncing” our possessions, not letting them own us can open the way to trusting God all the way through life and into the kingdom, to everlasting life, beyond possessions, ownership, greed and all that goes with that package. Hyperbole in the direction of grace and life (renouncing our possessions) can counterbalance our tendency to be drawn to sin and death. May the powerful figures of speech in the Bible always lead us into life.