

Proper 9a
Rom 7.21-8.6
July 6, 2008
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Practically everyone will remember the famous line from Paul Newman's early film *Cool Hand Luke*: "What we have here... is a failure to communicate...."

Each time the unctuous prison official in the movie uttered those words, the audience was clear that something very unpleasant was about to happen to a prisoner....in order that- shall we say- the lines of "communication" might be more open in the future!

Now, of course, it is not likely that the prisoners had failed to actually "hear" and "comprehend" the warden's words. It is simply that, in a culture such as a prison yard, those imprisoned have a very different agenda than those who attempt to keep them imprisoned.

The "identities" or "roles" of each is set by circumstance, and there are "impediments" that prevent one group from empathizing or even recognizing the heart of the other.

I must say, I had this rather unfortunate experience of this sort earlier this week. I had spent the morning engaged in the kind of physical activity for which clerical attire is not the most appropriate, and so when I came into the office, I was still wearing secular clothes. And of course, in such of state of being improperly dressed, a call came that we should go to the hospital. The problem did not come from the pastoral call... the patient recognized me readily enough, but at lunch in the Roper Cafeteria, I was confused that Fr. Dan's TWO pieces of fried chicken cost less than my ONE piece of chicken. Showing me the ticket, he said with glee, "It is because, Father, dressed like that, you failed to receive your clerical discount!"

I was so shaken that I made Dan drive my car out of the parking garage for fear the attendant wouldn't believe I was a priest! What we have here... is a failure to communicate.

Another story that I love - and it is absolutely a true story - involves a friend of Fr. Patrick's and mine. His name is Peter Buyck, and he is a wonderful person, but he has such a severe hearing deficit that he has someone travel with him while doing business just to insure that he is not misunderstood. But even then, there are a few glitches.

One day, Peter pulled up to a store and saw a man with a pick-up truck full of oranges. What he didn't know, is that the man selling the oranges was also deaf as a post. So the conversation went something like this:

- *How much are those oranges?*

- *Florida.*

- *That's too darn much!*

Ah... a failure to communicate... is exacerbated... when each has the SAME impediment!

In our epistle this morning, St. Paul speaks for the whole human condition when he describes the impediment of sin that is a universal ours.

I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. The good that I want to do, I fail to do... and the sin I

wish to avoid is the one I return to time and again. Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death?

What St. Paul describes here is the reality that human beings, left to their own devices, are utterly lost. Even when we WANT to do the right thing, we fail. When it comes to God's requirements... it is not that he has failed to communicate... it is that we are so compromised by our sinful natures, that we are unable to respond.

And isn't that the loneliest feeling in the world? To WANT to be a better person? A better husband or wife? A better parent? A better citizen.

And regardless of the face we put on for others, when our heads are on the pillow late at night, we know all too well our failures and shortcomings.

Wretched man that I am... who will deliver me from this body of death!

Happily, St. Paul does not end his epistle with Chapter Seven! He also gives us the answer.

Thanks be to God, there is now therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Jesus Christ, the Word of God Incarnate, has bridged the "communication gap".

He has not only spoken God's word, he has entered into the pain and suffering and temptation that all mortal flesh knows all too well.

He has accomplished what we cannot. Through his experience as fully human, he can sympathize with our weakness. Through his triumph over sin and death, we can enjoy the privilege and gift of new and eternal life.

And his gift to us is that we have a confidence that we could never have in our weak flesh. We do not have to wallow in the misery of our shortcomings. We never again have to say "wretched man that I am"...on the contrary, we are bold, even to call God Almighty Our Father.

This morning, Riley Marie Kiger comes to the waters of Baptism. And before our very eyes, God will mightily communicate his love... as he washes a new Christian soul, fills her with her Holy Spirit, and marks her as his own forever.

And to her and to each of us today Our Lord says those tender and comfortable words, Come unto me all ye who are weary and heavy laden. And I will give you rest. *Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. For I am gentle and lowly in heart... and you shall find rest for your souls.*

Amen.

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