

Your Communication Style  
Mark 1:9-15  
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St. John United Methodist Church  
Anchorage, Alaska  
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Today is the first Sunday in Lent, a forty day period of spiritual preparation for the highest holy day for Christians...Easter. Lent is a time where many Christians become more intentional about their faith journey. It is a time to clear the wax from our spiritual ears. It is a time to tune in and eliminate the static. It is a time to open the communication lines.

I love a definition of maturity I have shared with you before. Maturity is realizing that the most important lessons in life are the ones we thought we already knew. When it comes to communication with others many of us are not very mature, and I would include myself in this group. Why is it that we have to learn and relearn and relearn the lesson that not everyone communicates the same way? Not everyone hears a message we insist on giving only one way. Not all people are wired to receive a message with words only. Some people read body language and depend on those cues much more than words.

Perhaps there are similarities between how we communicate with people to how we communicate with God. We begin with scripture, the first chapter of Mark. All four gospels paint their own unique picture of Jesus but my favorite is Mark. Mark was the first gospel written. Matthew and Luke had Mark's gospel when they wrote theirs. Mark is the shortest gospel and lacks the embellishments of the others. For Mark it's just the facts, ma'am.

In today's lectionary scripture three things happen in these brief verses. Jesus is baptized. He is tempted in the desert for forty days. And he arrives in Galilee to preach the message that people should repent because God's kingdom is near.

At his baptism Jesus' relationship with God is affirmed. A voice from heaven proclaimed, "You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased." Whatever Jesus was about to experience over the course of the next three years, the temptations, the grueling travels, the popularity, the attacks from the religious right, the foundation for his ministry was his rock-solid relationship with the Father.

It was this relationship that he took with him into the desert for forty days. This was a time of testing for Jesus. It was a time to eliminate distractions to open up communication between himself and God. This is what these next forty days can be for you and me. We too, can enter a desert. We too, can eliminate some distractions. We too, can improve how we communicate with God.

Authors John Jackson and Lorraine Bosse-Smith have written a book called *Leveraging Your Communication Style*. They talk about three important keys to communication: Facts, Feelings, and Figures. Facts are the tangible part of what we are trying to say to others. They are the data and details that we want others to understand. Feelings are the emotions that happen when we have an interaction with someone. For some it will be the feelings they experience that is more important than the facts they are being told. Figures are the symbols or images that help us connect

with others. It would be an interesting exercise to read the rest of Mark and see how Jesus communicated with facts, feelings, and figures.

When it comes to spirituality and psychology it feels like we live in the age of the wheel with four quadrants. Lots of people are trying to help us understand ourselves with the use of a wheel. These authors are no different. Are you more of a task-oriented person or a people-oriented person? Are you a more outgoing or reserved person? In the upper left quadrant you have the combination of outgoing and task. This kind of person is goal-oriented, determined, decisive, and fast-paced. They call this Assertive Communicator. The upper right section are outgoing, people oriented people. They are energetic, interactive, influencing, and talkative. This is referred to as the Animated Communicator. The lower right section are reserved, people persons. They are reserved, supportive, and steady. These are the Attentive Communicators. The lower left quadrant are reserved, task people. They are detail-oriented, calculating, and correct. They call these the Accurate Communicators.

And of course they have a nice little test where you can discover your own communication style. But you probably can figure this out on your own. Is it obvious which style is your primary style? Can you see it changing depending on your social situation? Do you tend to be one style at work or school, then a different one at home? Which style did Jesus use?

The point the authors try to make is that we need to learn to adapt our communication style to what is needed at the moment. For example, military communications does not usually involve much animated communications. Assertive and accurate communications are needed in the cockpit or on the battlefield. But if you are to listen to a speaker for an hour you probably will want that speaker to be animated and assertive.

What I would like to do is talk for a bit about the difficulties each communication style encounters. First are the Assertive Communicators. In the book the authors write, "Assertive communicators often believe that people they speak with just don't get it. In fact, many assertive are so decisive that they often decide quickly that others are not tracking with them and they then shut down their communication efforts."<sup>1</sup> I wonder if we do something similar with God. Have you ever shut down communication with God because you felt that God was no longer tracking with you?

The key word for Animated communicators is energy. The authors write, "You are so high energy that, when you finally stop, you can often crash and burn. Animated communicators typically have two gears: full speed ahead and stop! Because you long to fit in and be accepted, you can sometimes be overly sensitive to criticism."<sup>2</sup> Do we do the same with God sometimes? We come to God with a fresh burst of energy but then lack the strength to keep up a spiritual discipline for the long haul?

Attentive communicators focus on people and want them to feel safe and valued. Attentive communicators need to be accepted by others and dislike conflict. They need to be able to read the signals from others. It doesn't matter what the words are. If an attentive communicator doesn't see positive nonverbal cues he or she will become fearful. This kind of fear can creep into our hearts when we feel that God is not sending

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<sup>1</sup> Leveraging Your Communication Style, Jackson and Bosse-Smith, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> Leveraging Your Communication Style, Jackson and Bosse-Smith, p. 53.

us signals that we are loved. Like the affirming words at Jesus' baptism you and I need to hear that God is pleased with us and that we are loved.

Finally, Accurate communicators fall into the trap of overanalyzing everything. The authors write, "Your greatest fear is being wrong."<sup>3</sup> To compensate accurate communicators will do thorough research and investigate everything. These kind of people are often viewed by others as picky, fussy, and difficult. I wonder what it is like for an Accurate communicator to be this way with God? These are likely the people who need every question answered before they feel they can have a deeper faith in God. Are there unanswered questions keeping you from a deeper faith in God?

The story is told about US-made audio players installed at Beijing's airport to scare birds off the runways. During takeoff and landing birds risk being sucked into the engines as it did with the US Air flight that landed in the Hudson River recently. The Chinese project failed because of a communication error. The machines played sounds of predatory birds such as hawks. The problem was that these sounds were those of American hawks. Birds had nothing in their experience that would cause them to be alarmed at such sounds. Only when they replaced the American hawk sounds with Chinese hawk sounds were they able to be successful in chasing the birds away.

Lent is a wonderful time to make a change in how we communicate with God. Jesus took his baptismal relationship with God into the desert for forty days. This time of testing strengthened his communication with the Father and prepared him for his amazing public ministry. You and I can take our baptism with us into a desert of our choosing. And we can discover a deeper communion with our Lord, a communion that can spill over to our relationships with others. Thanks be to God!

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<sup>3</sup> Leveraging Your Communication Style, Jackson and Bosse-Smith, p. 79.