***“Why Bless Her Heart, but...***

***And “It’s Under the Stole.” Barriers to Communication***

Having now lived in various parts of the country, I have had to make several “shifts” in terms of understanding the ways in which people communicate. Being born in the Steel Making area of Western Pennsylvania, communication was often as hard as steel - it was very direct, it could lead to grudge holding, and often a specific slight or action of 50 years ago could well be discussed and remembered on a regular basis but because the area was so family oriented with many relatives living “relatively” nearby, there could be some form of family mediation. In the Midwest — well, we called it “Midwest blunt” which means often very direct and not always with much charm. But where we now live, where there are elements of Southern Charm, I have learned that when a person wants to say something where their feelings are harsh, they just have to preface it with “Why bless her heart, but…she…”. Now it’s out! The harsh or judgmental words after the “but” are there but they have been softened with us having our hearts blessed.

It has been said of some personality types that they are a person who has no unarticulated thoughts or feelings. If he or she speaks it — you must listen. The phrase “I just tell like it is” means that the person really thinks that he or she have a total and objective grasp on reality, and that whatever they say, speak, or think is objectively true and factual. Really? In all of these matters, though, is an amazing egocentric reality, “I am able to pass judgment on you, but you had better NEVER pass judgment on me.” If you do then: cold shoulder, angry look, and the interesting phenomenon - “All of those good things that you have done do not count anymore because you upset me, and now I have determined that what you did do well, probably what not so good anyway.”

In the religious realm “under the stole” is often used. Frankly, I am using this phrase because I now hear it so much — but the original phrase is “under the seal.” Perhaps obviously priests have heard Confessions without wearing a purple stole, so what is binding is not the vestment — what is binding is the Seal of the Confessional. In short, we priests may not repeat anything we have been told “under the seal” although I think there are some people who state what they tell us “under the seal” who never avail themselves of the Sacrament by making a Private/Auricular Confession, because that would require them having to acknowledge their sins. The easy way out is simply to be able to say whatever we wish without having it repeated by putting handcuffs on the priest by saying “It’s under the seal” before the priest even gets to hear what “it” is. What is very sobering for a priest is when three or four others come and tell us the same thing the person said “in confidence.” Manipulation is never good. If we say the same thing to five separate people, do we not know that at some point those five people may actually get together and talk and determine, perhaps, that the real problem is the person who took us/them into their confidence? There simply is not way to sugarcoat sin. Sin is sin, and it needs to be confessed and forgiven.

Perhaps some might conclude that being much more direct is better because then we can refute what is being said on the spot. There are others, however, who tell us anything they want about another person by saying “I’m just venting” but later we discover that they vent more than a ventilation system. At the heart of the matter, I am addressing today is the issue of human beings thinking that they have a right to judge anyone. Sadly, some people seem to think that they work for God on an advisory capacity. Priests must always beware: before agreeing that it is “under the seal” it is wise to find out if it is a bad seed being planting, gossip, or an attempt on the part of the person to control others.

There are some ways to address problems such as these, but the solution is not always easy. People must be held accountable for what they say. Priests need to ask more questions, because although Pastoral Care is essential, sin is not always rooted out of a person by holding their hands. The Seal of the Confessional exists not to empower people to become more adept in their judgments and gossip, but rather to ensure that the penitent can “pour out their hearts” in the Confessional as they enumerate their sins in the context of receiving counsel and direction and Absolution. When we say “Go and sin no more” it does not mean “Now that your slate is clean go out and repeat the gossip and falsehoods that you just confessed.” The SEAL is a double edged sword. The priest can’t repeat anything, but the penitent has promised insofar as God’s grace can provide that they will not intentionally repeat the sins they confessed.

For Prayer Book Christians who prefer the Elizabethan style of English, I have every so often gazed over the congregation in the Nave to see what they looked like when they say, “The burden of them (sins) is intolerable.” Actually, I wonder what would happen if we all - penitent and priest - demonstrated what it looks like when we confess that the burden of our sins is intolerable. Really? Or are we busy getting ready for the Comfortable Words?

Finally, look very carefully at all that led up to the Crucifixion of Jesus and then name the types of sins committed by those who plotted against him

+Gossip

+Half truths

+Out of context statements

+Private meetings held “in confidence”

+Emotional bribery

+Personal gain

+Denying responsibility

The list goes one. It’s much easier to blame the Romans or the Pharisees - but we need to remember that they did not crucify our Lord on their own. We must regularly look at our words and our behavior and then ask if our human behavior would have crucified Jesus. Maybe not, but has it ever hurt others in our life? At the end of many movies it states “No animals were injured in the filming” but maybe we need to look at our lives to see if we can say “No human beings were injured in the filming of my life by my words or my actions.” And the good news is: true repentance, true amendment of life and true absolution.

“Ah, holy Jesus”.

Words: Johann Heermann (1585 - 1647)

Translation by: Robert Seymour Bridges (1844 - 1930)

Verse 2:

Who was the guilty?

Who brought this upon thee?

Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee.

‘Twas I, Lord Jesus,

I it was denied thee:

I CRUCIFIED THEE