

“People Usually Judge What THEY Hear, Not What WE Intend”

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman
at St. Andrew’s United Church, Sudbury
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READINGS: Proverbs 1:20-33 and James 3:1-12

It may not be an example of sticking one’s foot in the mouth. It may simply be a case of miscommunication. You may have said something that has a double edged message and were unaware of how it might be taken. Or the other person was looking for a meaning beyond what you imagined. Even so, we all have been involved in an interaction where the end result is misunderstanding, confusion, or at worst upset at what had been said.

It certainly is that way in politics. Misunderstandings are rampant, almost welcomed.

So it was interesting for me to see in a book of Great Canadian Speeches the words of Sir Wilfrid Laurier in 1891 at the death of Sir John A Macdonald.

“Sir John A Macdonald now belongs to the ages, and it can be said with certainty, that the career which has just been closed is one of the most remarkable careers of this century. It would be premature at this time to attempt to fix or anticipate what will be the final judgment of history upon him, but there were in his career and in his life, features so prominent and so conspicuous that already they shine with a glow which time cannot alter, which even now appear before the eye such as they will appear to the end of history.”

We are not used to such tributes in recent memory of one politician to another. The discourse has changed, though it has been changed through much of the 20th and 21st century.

Winston Churchill, himself know for both witticism and biting criticisms of others, offers this insight: “Life is fraught with opportunities to keep your mouth shut.”

Of course he rarely followed his own advice. When George Bernard Shaw wrote him with a note saying "I am enclosing 2 tickets to the first night of my new play – bring a friend if you have one," Churchill replied "Can't possibly attend first night, will attend second, if there is one."

His view of people could be summed up by the comment: "I am fond of pigs. Dogs look up to us; cats look down on us. Pigs treat us as equals."

Maybe that was behind a famous comment about democracy. As a politician who must have been frustrated at times at the to and fro of campaigning, he remarked: "The best argument against democracy is a 5 min. conversation with the average voter."

Words can spark a debate, anger, upset, confusion, even hatred.

Charles de Gaulle sparked issues in 1967 when he visited Quebec as a head of state and proclaimed: "Vive Montreal! Vive le Quebec! Vive le Quebec libre! Vive le Canada francais!"

Then Prime Minister Pearson expressed concern that a head of state would make such comments, and looked forward to a fuller discussion when de Gaulle visited Ottawa in a couple of days, but the French President cut his visit short and returned to France, skipping his scheduled visit with Prime Minister Pearson in Ottawa, and never to come to Canada again.

Words are important in the church, and certainly no more important than at a General Council.

Four weeks ago today I was flying back from Corner Brook, Newfoundland, having served as a Commissioner to the 42nd General Council.

In some ways I felt like an intruder – I do not get listed as a Manitou Commissioner, because technically I was not – elected by the General Council Sub-Executive as a Commissioner at large due to my role as the chair of a standing committee – the Theology and Inter-Church Inter-Faith Committee. This General Council, like most, was filled with controversial issues.

Investment policies with gold companies, particularly Goldcorp, and investments with fossil fuel companies; issues related to peace in Israel and Palestine; reports on Membership and Ministry which surface almost every other General Council, and at least once or twice a decade for the last 50 years.

Probably the most anticipated report, and the one that was the focus for the vast majority of the time at the Council, was the report of the Comprehensive Review Committee that recommended a significant change to the structure and organization of the United Church.

The report was studied by a separate sessional committee that met for 4 days before the Council began, and actually spent significantly more hours the first two days of the Council's gathering in order to finish its recommendations.

In the end, much of what the original report said was affirmed. We will move to a three court system of pastoral charge, regional councils, and a denominational council (as long as the whole church, including congregations, pass a remit to that effect). The regional councils replace presbytery and conference, but with very specific responsibilities, and much of what has been presbytery will be expected to be picked up by ad-hoc clusters.

The denominational council also will have little powers and a much reduced staff, but one of the recommendations, the formation of a College of Ministers, was rejected for, instead, a ministry vocations office at the denominational level.

The original recommendation, one of the most helpful and dramatic in the original report from my reading, received little support. Some worried that lay people would be determining the expectations of ministers (they do so now); others feared it was impossible for a board of 20 people – 10 ministry personnel and 10 lay people – could set standards and handle discipline for the whole church. Still others did not like the word "College," especially those from educational careers who heard in that term an organization out to set arbitrary standards and mandatory processes that ultimately may not help either ministry personnel or congregations.

Now while some language generated dissent or debate, little rankle or upset was experienced on the floor. Unlike the contentious debates of the 1980's, and spill over into the 1990's and early 2000's, debate for the most part was civilized and reflective. Gone was the rancour of another era.

It is important when we speak for the church that we are concerned for what is right for the world. But it also is true that we should do so in a way that elicits dialogue and understanding.

I turn again to Winston Churchill, whose quick wit and acerbic humour did not dominate everything he said and thought – he also shared that “There are many opportunities for us to stand up and say what needs to be said; but there are many more opportunities when we should sit down and listen.”

Wisdom, the focus of the proverbs passage, is knowing the difference between those two realities.

We are part of a church that is known for its ability to stand up and speak, be counted about the issues of the day. And I am thankful we will be led by a Moderator (indeed, both Moderator candidates on the final ballot represent this reality), we are led by a Moderator who is known for her ability to stand up and speak, but also to sit down and listen to others.

She shared with me that she had been approached to be a candidate for Moderator, and thought it was a nice gesture by friends and said “no” every time it was raised. But this year different people asked her, people she did not expect to do so, with an urgency that shocked her, and so she decided at the very least she should take these entreaties seriously and listen to them, pray about them, and discern if she should allow her name to stand for the office. The result was the Rt. Rev. Jordan Cantwell's election as the Moderator who will preside at the 43rd General Council.

May she continue to stand up and speak, and may she model ways that we may sit calmly and listen to one another, so that wisdom, sensitivity, and hope may prevail within our church.

People will hear what they will hear, and it may not always be what we say, but we need to know dialogue is as much about listening as it is about speaking.

Thomas More declared that “Dialogue exists when two friends of eternal truth swear to each other that they will only yield to the truth.”

May it be so for us all. AMEN