

## Holy Double-talk

communion meditation

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Matthew 13:9-21

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George Orwell's 1949 novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* about a future society under the domination of a government devoted to mind control is credited with the origin of the concept *doublespeak*. Although Orwell never uses the term in his novel, the concept is formed and the practice becomes apparent in the emerging modern world of the next half-century. Doublespeak is the manipulation of language to deceive and to placate rather than to inform. Euphemisms have become the order of the day in public speech. All of us use them, and preachers are particularly prone to wander into the ambiguity of doublespeak. New concepts are invented to soften and distract rather than to clarify, such as referring to someone as mentally challenged rather than stupid, vertically challenged rather than short, or age advanced rather than old. People never die; they just pass away. Much of modern doublespeak is deliberately formed by political strategists to sway public opinion or by businesses to market a questionable product. Estate taxes have become death taxes. Some doublespeak is amusing, but some is malicious, like Timothy McVeigh's reference to the killing of children in the Oklahoma City bombing with the military doublespeak "collateral damage."

Since 1974 the National Council of Teachers of English has given an annual "Doublespeak Award" for the American who in public speech provides the best (or worst) example for using deceptive language. The deadline for nominations is September 15, so you need to hurry if you are going to participate. Most years the award goes to a politician. The 2009 award went to commentator Glenn Beck. After opposing national healthcare reform in 2008 with the statement, "You are about to lose the best health care system in the world," Beck had routine surgery followed by serious complications. He then launched a diatribe against doctors and hospitals with the contradictory statement, "Getting well in this country actually will almost kill you."

**Communication is always ambiguous.** Humans live with the myth that we can "tell it like it is." We boast about "calling a spade a spade" until someone dares to ask, "are you talking about a card game or a garden?" Have you ever tried to communicate with someone who does not speak your language? We usually resort to a game of charades, using sign language, or pointing to objects in the room to get across our ideas.

Even within the continental United States we have variations in dialect and language native to certain areas and foreign to others. Some of us are still trying to learn to speak Tennessee. I recall my first week in Oak Ridge having lunch with a church leader to discuss the work ahead of us. After we were obviously finished with the meal, the waitress came by to ask, "Do *youins* want anything else?" I was amused, but I could imagine someone trying to learn English as a second language being terribly confused with references to "youins" and "usins," words which also were used by the natives in some parts of Kentucky. Of course everyone from Georgia or Texas knows that the proper term is "y'all." When our Turkish exchange student Ayben finished her year in Oak Ridge to return home and continue her education, she entered the University of Ankara to study English. Her British tutor was horrified by the Tennessee English she had learned during her stay in the U.S.

Quibbling over words is a game we humans play that sometimes leads to hilarious laughter and other times to divorce, hostility, or war. Those who insist that every word of the Bible must be interpreted literally not only fail to comprehend the nature of the Bible; they reveal their ignorance about the problems of human language. All words are symbols of the reality to which they point. You cannot take words to the bank as equal in value to things they describe. People listen to a sermon or a newscast and hear the words as they connect to individual experiences, and they usually come out with a wide diversity of meanings. So the Supreme Court quibbles over the words of the Constitution, while Christians quibble over words of the Bible. Both came from another era. The words of the Bible originated in a totally different language and an ancient culture far removed from our time in history.

How can we expect that everyone should arrive at exactly the same idea about words like *salvation*, *grace*, or *faith*? Last week in the International Council of Community Churches conference, our guest speaker Ron Allen inquired of the clergy about a common experience in ministry. He asked whether we had ever encountered someone with an impression of a sermon that had no connection to what we had actually said. The pastors in the room were immediately engaged by a common

experience. People see through the lens of their own experiences, and they hear from their internal dictionary of their own culture and background. All of us are guilty of hearing what we think we know and seeing what we prefer to believe.

***The gospel is a language miracle.*** Jesus was aware of the barriers that stand between us, stopping our ears and distorting our vision. Problems with human communication blind us to truth and distort our understanding of what we hear, so Jesus told stories. According to the Synoptic Gospels, his favorite tool of communication was the parable. Rather than speaking in creeds, theological formulas, and legalese, Jesus lifted stories from everyday life to illustrate the meaning of the gospel. He talked about things people know, understand, and experience to awaken their perception of spiritual realities beyond our simple, practical, daily reach. The stories were sometimes entertaining and sometimes provocative but always about a dimension of reality far greater than the surface of the story. The Twelve were not stupid, but they also were not theologians or academics. The disciples were mostly simple fishermen and laborers. When Jesus spoke in parables, the disciples wanted an explanation. They were seeking not only to know the higher meaning of his story, but to know why he chose to tell stories rather than to lay down the law. Jesus said, "Let anyone with ears listen!" but the meaning of his stories was not so obvious. Beverly Gaventa notes that the Bible presents more questions than solutions and that Jesus' parables refused to play the "answer game." Rather, they stir up new questions each time they are read (*Christian Century*, June 14-23, 1993, p. 629).

So Jesus told a story about telling stories, the parable of the sower. He used words to paint a picture of what happens when people have ears and try to listen. It is like sowing grain in a typical Palestinian field. The diversity of background and experience among the people creates a wide diversity for receiving the gospel that Jesus proclaimed. Some are like the hardened soil of a path, others like rocky ground, others like a briar patch, and a few like rich receptive soil in which the seed can take root and grow. I recall a sermon by John Claypool in seminary chapel. He was probably the most popular preacher in town at the time, but he noted that even Jesus admitted to failure in reaching three out of four people. Rather than beating ourselves up for our failures, we ought to welcome the miracle when a few people hear, understand, and respond to the gospel.

Not once in Acts does Luke use the word *parable* so prominent in his Gospel. In fact, neither the word nor the stories appear in the Fourth Gospel, John. But the problem of understanding continues beyond the Gospels. Acts begins with a miracle of understanding. Pentecost is the gathering of people out of the language and culture diversity of the time. The Holy Spirit breaks through the barriers of language to encounter each person at his/her level of understanding. Both Pentecost and Jesus' word about parables address the same subject. The things of God are beyond ordinary language. Speaking of God tends to make our dictionaries useless blobs of words; but when God connects with people, the barriers fall. Even if we cannot hear or see clearly, all of us can experience the miracle of the unseen presence of a loving God.

***Doing may be better than seeing.*** As important as the Bible and preaching have been to Protestants for the past five centuries, we Protestants need to open our lives to doing of the Word of God. In fact, the stories of Jesus in the Gospels are far more than words on paper. The Gospels struggle to communicate events and experiences through human language. Much of the time they fail. To understand, you have to experience Christ for yourself.

So we Christians gather around a Table to act out the meaning of the bread and the cup as they illustrate what God was doing in the life of Jesus. First came the event, the death of Jesus on a Roman cross. Then came the struggle of the disciples to find words to express the meaning of this event in the lives of people who believe in a God of love. Finally, the church made a practice of "doing" the gospel in the Lord's Supper. The word was "do this" in remembrance of me. The sacrament of the Table is a parable in action. The bread is Christ's body. The wine is Christ's blood. And we are to receive Christ into our bodies, into our lives to live out the doing of the Word of God in our world.