

**Sermon: “In Many and Various Ways God Has Spoken. Will We?”**

Scriptures: Exodus 3: 1-15; Hebrews 1: 1-4

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It is so frustrating when we try to communicate with someone and he/she does not “get it.” It is even more frustrating when we try a new approach—a new and different way of communicating the same message and the hearer still doesn’t “get it” or misunderstands the message. And even worse yet are the times when we try to communicate a message, the message is understood, then is promptly ignored.

I suspect most of us are tempted and often do throw up our hands, giving up when others don’t “get it.” Or, we keep trying—often using the same methodologies as before—getting similar results and somehow being surprised!

As we read the Bible, it is obvious that from the beginning God had a message to deliver to humankind. And, from even a cursory reading of scripture, it is pretty obvious that despite the “many and various ways” God chose to reveal himself and his message, many people either didn’t get it or chose to ignore the message and the messenger.

Of course, not all of God’s people missed or ignored the message. Moses, about whom we read earlier, clearly heard and saw God and then obeyed. However, it is clear that God had to go to pretty great lengths to get the message to Moses and to convince him to say “yes.” A burning bush, no less!! By God’s grace, Moses saw, heard and eventually agreed to receive God’s message and to deliver his message to others.

The prophets of the Old Testament also heard and responded to God’s message. While they did not always do so eagerly and willingly at first, the prophets heard and responded. Then, often at great risk to their lives, they went forth to tell the message to others. William Barclay suggests that each of the prophets revealed a different dimension of God’s personality. Each delivered a specific call for a specific time in history. God used Moses, the prophets and so many others to communicate to people throughout the ages. Sometimes they listened. Sometimes they didn’t. Sometimes they “got it.” Sometimes they didn’t. And it is the same for us today.

Still, I would think that it was highly frustrating for God. God tried teaching through words, through stories, through miracles, visual effects, “multi-media,” teachable moments, and through deliverance of his people from bondage to freedom, from exile to home. Yet, many still didn’t understand. Many understood, but chose to ignore. And it is the same for us today.

One might expect that God would give up. One might expect that God would just keep trying the same ways of reaching us. But that is not what our merciful God chose to do. God chose to come to us in person—to be incarnate—to take on human flesh—to become one of us and one with us in the person of Jesus the Messiah. He LIVED his message among humanity, illustrating the heart of his message by dying an excruciating death for humanity.

And even though many still did not and do not comprehend and/or respond to God's message of love, God continues to this day, to this very moment, to reach out to us and this broken world in many and various ways. God speaks through words and stories, through miracles, visual effects, multi-media, teachable moments, deliverance, through the living Word Jesus Christ . . . and so much more. God never gives up. God never stops creatively and actively pursuing humanity in many and various ways.

I have a number of feelings as I ponder these truths. First, I am filled with gratitude. How grateful I am that God loves us, his children, enough to pursue us in every way possible. I am grateful that God never gives up.

I am also humbled. I am humbled because I know that I am far too quick to give up on people. Perhaps we all are. We try to reach people, to communicate with them and all too often give up prematurely. I believe many of us, me included, are prone to getting entrenched in how we'll try to communicate. "If he/she can't get it my way, then forget it . . . and forget them." We are quick to throw up our hands and give up.

This can happen in the church, too. How many times in the past have I heard someone say about children's and youth ministry: "The approaches worked back when I was a kid or back when I was raising my kids, it can work for these kids today." We don't need to spend money on current curriculum, or creative ways to reach kids through media, for example. The old ways worked for us. They can get the message the same way. Let me say how grateful I am for Nicole Belanus, our Children's and Youth Minister who brings fresh ideas and approaches and is willing to reach out to kids in many and various ways so that they might know and grow in Christ.

I know of a minister who chose to print (as we do) the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed in the bulletin, in case someone doesn't know them. One of his parishioners said to him: "I don't see why we need to do this. If they don't know the Lord's Prayer, they have no business being here!" (I'm still trying to "connect the dots" on that statement!) We cannot and should not assume that everyone knows. We are called to be willing to share the Good News in many and various ways—in ways that are accessible to everyone.

To what degree are we as individuals willing to communicate in "many and various ways" the message of love and grace in our relationships? To what degree are we as a church willing to communicate in many and various ways the Good News of the Gospel?

I use the book *The Five Love Languages* by Gary Chapman in premarital counseling. I ask all the couples to read the book, and then we discuss portions of it. Chapman has also written *The Five Love Languages of Children* and *The Five Love Languages of Teens*. In each of these books he states that we do not all express nor hear love expressed in the same way. We do not all speak (or hear) the same love languages. He suggests in the marriage book that there are five primary love languages—ways we express love to another and ways we experience love from another.

The five love languages are quality time, acts of service, physical touch, words of affirmation, and giving/receiving gifts. In many marriages (perhaps God has a sense of humor) the spouses have different love languages. Very often, couples "miss each other"

(they don't connect) when they try to express love for the other. They tend to speak their own language, rather than the language their spouse understands best. That's why a wife may say I don't think my husband loves me, and he responds "of course I do—I did or said the following things. Why didn't you get it?"

Chapman argues that in our relationships we must choose "many and various ways" to express love to others. We must learn the love language of the other and choose to speak that language – even if it is foreign to us."

In our marriage, we discovered that Dan's primary love languages are acts of service and words of affirmation. Those are the things that assure him he's loved. Mine are quality time and physical touch.

For years, Dan has upon arriving home started cleaning up the house and making beds. He felt this would communicate love to me. While I appreciate it, I really needed him to talk to me, hug and kiss me (since my primary love languages are quality time and physical touch.) His cleaning up and making beds didn't really say "I love you" to me.

And, for 20 years I've not made beds (after all you're just going to get back into them!) nor been particularly tidy. I've also been prone to fly off the handle and say unkind things—sometimes without thinking. I grew up in a family where we sort of said what was on our minds and got it all out. While we expressed appreciation for one another, regular sharing of "words of affirmation" was not commonplace. As you can see, I didn't do such a great job of speaking Dan's love languages of "acts of service" and "words of affirmation." The things I did do were appreciated, but without attention to these "love languages" Dan has at times not felt especially loved either.

Gary Chapman has now co-authored with Jennifer Thomas a book titled *The Five Languages of Apology*. Based on the same premise, Chapman and Thomas suggest that people have different ways of saying and hearing "I'm sorry." Have you ever had a falling out with someone and you felt you had apologized? Have you ever had that person say later: "You never apologized? You didn't say (fill in the blank)." Chapman and Thomas suggest we need to speak our apologies in "many and various ways" for different people to understand. Some people need to hear expressions of regret: "I'm sorry." Others need for the person apologizing to express regret: "I was wrong." Some need to hear "What can I do to make it right?" Still others need: "I'll try not to do that again." They suggest the fifth language of an apology is "Will you forgive me?"

Can you see how the love languages and the languages of an apology can be applied not only in our personal relationships but also in the life of the church? We can make every effort to try to learn the love language of those with whom we serve closely in the church. Since we mess up with one another, it is a good idea to try to learn the apology language of those we offend in the church.

To what degree are we as a church seeking to speak the language of our community? Are we as a church willing and eager to share the good news of Christ with the Denbigh community through our words and actions in "many and various ways?" First, do we even know our community? What is the average age of people in Denbigh? Are most people single or married? Are most families single-parent or dual-parent families? What are the various ethnic groups represented in our community? What

styles of worship are preferred? What's the median income? What are the needs of children and youth, the senior adults, the empty nesters and others in our community? Sometimes churches just keep speaking the same "language"—doing the same things they've always done. Yet the world and our communities are changing in the ways the Good News can be heard and understood.

In what ways are we as Denbigh Presbyterian Church eager to know our community and to show and tell the Good News of the Gospel in many and various ways? In what ways are we willing to be incarnate among the people we are called to serve—that is, to become one with them?

In what ways are we as individuals, in our closest relationships, eager and willing to know the love languages and the apology languages of others so that we might show and tell the love of Christ in many and various ways? Think about your spouse, your kids; your roommate; your co-worker; your friends; fellow church members and others. How can they best hear and experience your love and God's love?

In many and various ways God has spoken to us and all of humanity that we might know his love. Will we, in like manner, speak to others in many and various ways that they, too, might know God's love and ours?