

February 14, 2010
Last Sunday of Epiphany
The Rev. Kathy Crary

St James Episcopal Church

Sometimes I am in a conversation and don't understand what is being said. This could be for a variety of reasons, a turn of phrase in Latin or French, for example and I don't know the word or phrase and miss a little bit of the meaning of the sentence. Or you might be in a conversation when a phrase is used that could mean two things. Knowing that, Mark Twain wrote this oft-quoted comment on language, I quote him here in a letter to George Bainton, dated October 15, 1988,

The difference between the almost right word & the right word is really a large matter--it's the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.

For my example of this, there is the word phrase second-hand. There are varieties of meanings of the word, which is usually served up with a dash in the middle. One of the meanings has to do with time and stop watches and clocks. By a show of hands who went there?

Another meaning has to do with garage sales, hand-my-downs and antique or nearly antique. Again with a show of hands, who went there?

Now let me give you the quotation in context and let me know which one is the way the word is intended. In honor of Valentine's Day, I use the words and wisdom of Tina Turner as she asks, "What's love go to do with it...?" Here is the chorus of the famous song:

Oh, what's love got to do, got to do with it?

What's love but a second hand emotion

What's love got to do, got to do with it?

Who needs a heart

When a heart can be broken?

I can see her striding onto the stage and I want to walk up and ask if love is brief, like a stop watch's ticking second hand, or is love a used item like something in a thrift shop item that has been discarded and it is now available for cheap.

Two ways to view the same song and both of them just might work!

Today's lesson has a whole lot going on. It is enough to be on top of this hill. For the Jews, many amazing things happen on top of hills, so one of the names for God in the Hebrew language is God of the mountains. Being on top of the mountain also affords you a view, something that geologists, photographers and military strategists will tell you is important in their professions. Sharing the top of the hill with Jesus are Moses, Elijah, Peter, James and John.

Moses and Elijah speak with Jesus and we are told the conversation deals with his trip into Jerusalem. Peter, James and John deal with the fatigue that seems to be their lot, and they stay awake here. We will hear of their sleeping in a garden not too many more weeks down the road.

What a gathering. Moses the great leader and the bearer of the commandments, who had seen God face to face and lived! And Elijah who was raised up in the great chariot of God, leaving his awe-struck prophet successor, Elisha, flat-footed and amazed that Elijah did not die. And the voice of God proclaims Jesus as his own, once again. This was an affirmation of the baptism with John at the Jordan River, one of the events we commemorated earlier in this Epiphany Season.

And now, in the midst of their sleepiness and confusion, they look up to see Jesus only.

I see two great meanings here, just like I did with the turn of phrase in Tina Turner's music.

The lesson for the three disciples that accompanied Jesus would be the same as it was for the church. The tradition of Judaism, the faith community of which Jesus was a member, was now seeing a passing of that tradition to the disciples. And with that shift came the mission to Jew and Gentile.

The disciples were aware of Moses and the commandments and the history of the Jews' ongoing, failing efforts to keep those commandments. The Gospel writers and Paul and the writers of our New Testament books remind us that Moses brought the law to the people and Jesus fulfilled it to the letter so that we didn't have to. And Jesus would lead this people to freedom and a different Promised Land.

So it is that we stand with the disciples, hoping to better understand who Jesus is and to discern if we are really ready to follow him.

We would do well to hear the words of God and know Jesus who is sent among us, "This is my Son, my Chosen. Listen to him!"

I pray that we have the eyes to see and ears to hear, that we might be transformed and acknowledge Jesus for who he is, taking our first steps towards Jerusalem.