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C. Tabor Fisher, Ph.D.  
All Saints Parish, Syr., NY

## One Flock

A few weeks ago I shared an article I've been working on with Fr. Fred. The article deals with how we talk when we talk about race relations. Given our upcoming book study on Brian Massingale's *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, he asked me to share some of my ideas with you. So here I am. I do have one piece of sage advice to share with you in this homily – don't tell Fr. Fred you are thinking about something!

Okay, first some background on what language can do. Words only work if they are shared; you won't understand me if you do not share the words I use. If I were to say to you that "I'm nervous about giving the homily" you could understand that sentence more or less deeply depending upon the vocabulary, communities, histories and experiences that we share. On the most basic level, if I were to say, "I'm nervous about giving the homily" to someone who did not speak English, no communication would happen at all. If I were speaking to a person who did not regularly attend church, the word "homily" might be unfamiliar. If I said "I'm nervous about giving the homily" to one of you, you might reassure me about how wonderful this community is – that I will be addressing friends – and help to calm my fears by assuring me that you would be sitting there, smiling, should I need a reassuring face to look at. The better we know each other, the more likely that the words we use will produce deep, rich meaning between us.

Creating meaning together is one of the most powerful things that language does. Language connects us to each other. First, our shared experiences, histories and communities are revealed when we speak to each other. Our words reach out to others – wanting to be heard – and the response we get indicates what we do share with each other, where we are understood. Thus our speaking to one another reveals and strengthens our relationships. Our speaking can also reveal when we are not understood, when the other person doesn't have enough context to "get" what we are saying – even if she

understands the dictionary definition of each and every word. The lack of a shared vocabulary or history can become painfully obvious when communication fails.

At the same time that our speaking and hearing reveals what we share and what we do not share, our conversations actively create connections between us. You share a story with someone about where you were on 9/11, 15 years ago. You describe your emotional reaction – and find that the person you are speaking to felt something very similar. You feel closer to that person; you bond. That assumes, of course, that your feelings resonate – that what you share in terms of life experience, history and shared community is echoed by the other person.

The day after the attacks we awoke in my neighborhood to small US flags planted at the front of each house. The city had put them there while we were sleeping. For many, waking up to see that flag spoke to a shared pride in our country, a shared determination to not “let the terrorists win.” But that was not the experience of my Muslim friends, Prima and Sunaryo. When they awoke, not only was there a flag in front of their home, there was a gallon of pig’s blood poured over their car. In that context, the flag didn’t “say” the same thing it did to other people. When they heard the sentence, “We cannot let the terrorists win,” Prima and Sunaryo knew that they were not considered part of the “we;” they were considered part of the “terrorists.” What we say, the words and symbols we use, can connect us – but they can also profoundly disconnect us. And the same word can do that in different ways, even in the same sentence. Often our words draw circles around “us” and “them.” Pulling people we share things with together into the warm embrace of “us” was a natural enough reaction after that terrifying day – but, at the same time, pushing away the people we are afraid of, exiling “them” to a distance.

The Pharisees in today’s gospel draw these kinds of connections and disconnections when they complain that Jesus is eating with “them” – those sinners, over there. When the Pharisees say that, they make clear that *they* are not sinners – the sinners are over there. We, the Pharisees, are righteous people who do not need repentance.

Looking back now, with the distance of over 2,000 years, we know the Pharisees were wrong. They, too, needed repentance. We can see their errors

from within our world view – the shared meanings and histories and communities of 2,000 years of Christianity. But consider how the world looked to them in that moment when they saw Jesus eating with tax collectors. From within their own history – a history of having been conquered by the Romans, who then demanded taxes, those who colluded with the Romans in gathering those taxes were sinners. In the midst of their shared communities as they tried hard to make their everyday lives holy, people who seemed to not be trying to live uprightly, were also sinners.

When we construct an “us” and a “them,” the “us” is always the good guys. It is difficult to see where we are mistaken, where our behavior is offensive, if we only see ourselves through our own worldview.

As Jesus eats with the tax collectors and the sinners, he is trying to return lost sheep into the flock. But he doesn’t ignore the Pharisees. The Pharisees themselves taught in parables. When Jesus responds to their statement by telling parables, he is using a form of language they value and understand – stories. This is an act of compassion on Jesus’s part. Just as Jesus did, we need to have compassion for the poor Pharisees – everything in their society proclaimed that they were the good guys. Let’s realize how hard it was for them to see themselves through the eyes of others. Unable to see their own failings, the Pharisees are also lost sheep. As he tells parables to the Pharisees, Jesus is also trying to return lost sheep into the flock. His speaking to both groups breaks down the “us” v. “them” views of the Pharisees. All of us are part of the same flock.

As we talk about race relations in the United States, we might talk in such a way that native born white people are the righteous “us” – and encroaching undocumented immigrants are the “them.” Or, we could flip that and talk in such a way that the exploited laborer is the righteous “us” – and the multinational corporations making money off of that labor is the “them.” We might speak as if the forces of law and order, the police and the courts are the righteous “us,” while the criminals and those who flout police authority by refusing to obey the lawful command of a police officer are the “them.” On the other hand, we could talk about the historically oppressed people of color in the United States as the righteous “us” – and the police using excessive force as the “them.” Any of these

ways of talking will divide us and keep us from reaching the racial justice we pray for.

Instead, we must consider how to talk with and about each other in ways that acknowledge that we are, already, members of the same flock. We need to view each and every person involved as a valuable coin that we must recover. I consider how I would mediate a disagreement between my two children when they were younger. It never occurred to me to exile one of them into the category of “them.” Instead, I realized that both of them felt their claim on the disputed toy to be valid. And, of course, both of them felt their brother’s claim was not valid. So what do we do in such a situation?

We look at what Jesus did in today’s gospel. How does Jesus recommend we seek out lost sheep? How shall we look for the valuable coins we are disconnected from?

First, let us note that Jesus exercises what Fr. Arrupe called a preferential option for the poor and the vulnerable. He eats with the tax collectors and sinners – not the Pharisees – even though he wants to recover both. We must acknowledge the power that some worldviews have over others. It is easy to see the world through the eyes of the powerful – their views are broadcast on every television, over every radio, in every newspaper and magazine. In order to see the world through the eyes of the poor and the vulnerable, we need to get to know them. Like Jesus, we need to share a meal with them; we need to sit and talk. I think about the crime dramas that I love to watch – Law & Order, Criminal Minds, Blue Bloods. These shows offer our society a complex, but positive view of police. At the same time, I know that many people of color in the United States do not trust the police and understand them to be an occupying force, rather than public servants. That view makes sense within a history that includes lynching, police dogs, fire hoses, and racial profiling. Just last month, Sylville Smith was shot in Milwaukee when he fled on foot from a traffic stop, carrying a weapon. When Smith looked at the police officers, through his own history of multiple arrests – which in all but one misdemeanor, ending in charges being dropped – when he looked at police through the experiences of his community, through the shared understandings of the people in his neighborhood – what did he see? When the officer in question looked at Smith through his own history,

through his training, in light of heavy responsibilities – what did he see? When protestors arrived the same day, rioting in response to the shooting before we had details – what histories, what shared understandings drove them there? We need to understand these tragic incidents through all eyes – all at the same time.

When talking to someone who does not have the same history, experiences or community as we do, we need to be willing to be confused and struggle to understand. The first thing that the woman who had lost a coin did was to turn on the lights. We need to see it all, sweep hidden truths out from the corners and do our best to absorb it. We may find more than a lost coin; we may find ourselves. As we look back at ourselves from the viewpoint of others we may discover things about ourselves that surprise us. We may find out that we, too, are sinners in need of repentance. But that is good news! For when we discover these things, there will be joy in heaven.