When I was a United Methodist pastor some thirty plus years ago, a woman named Carol called me at the church office. She said that while she was working in her kitchen that day Jesus had spoken to her. And he gave her a message for me. Of course, I invited her to come right on over. But I have to admit that what I was really thinking was, “This woman has got to be crazy. Jesus is talking to her in her kitchen – really? Besides, who does she think she is to be giving me a message from God? I’m the pastor. I’m the one who’s supposed to be doing the speaking for God.”

Now I realize that I am not the first person to respond to another in this way. In the reading from Exodus, Moses was asked to stop two people from prophesying because they hadn’t been in the designated place for receiving this gift. And in the gospel, James and John tried to stop a person from casting out demons in Jesus’ name because he didn’t belong to the group of disciples that Jesus had called to follow him. In their mind he didn’t have any business doing such a thing. That was their job!

It seems that people have always tried to confine the work of God to particular individuals who have been designated for such things. But, clearly, this isn’t the way Moses or Jesus saw it. For them when it came to doing the work of God, the more the better. And as we read through the scriptures, often we find God calling upon the most unlikely ones of all to speak on his behalf.

For instance, in the twenty-second chapter of the Book of Numbers a prophet by the name of Balaam was on his way to do something that God wasn’t too happy about. I won’t go into all the details - you’ll have to check it out. The bottom line is that after getting angry and striking his donkey for the third time the Lord opened the mouth of the donkey who said to Balaam, “What have I done to you that you have struck me three times?” Of course, Balaam couldn’t help but realize that God had something to do with this extraordinary happening. I mean, it’s not every day that a donkey speaks!

Now at least one thing we should learn from this story is that if God can speak through a donkey then he can surely speak through any human being – even those of us who act like such a creature at times. So coming back to the woman who called me saying that she had a message from Jesus for me – well, Carol did come over to the church. And while I was expecting that she was going to have something totally bizarre to tell me, what she said is, “Jesus wants me to tell you that he loves you very much.”

Well, I have to say, I was deeply moved by this. I’d been going through a pretty difficult time. And this very simple, direct message was just what I needed to hear. I learned a valuable lesson that day. God can speak through any person. So it is important that we remain open, and listen to what God is saying to us through the words and actions of others, especially the ones we might initially consider to be the least likely to be delivering such a message. For if we don’t, it can only lead to our impoverishment.

We had an example of this in our reading from James. There we were told of how some of the wealthy members of the church had been withholding wages from their workers. And those workers were crying out for justice. But the wealthy thought that they didn’t have to listen to their cries. To them those poor workers were of no account. They had no status, power or position.

But James says that God thought they were worth listening to. In fact, through those workers, he had been delivering a message to the wealthy people of that community – a message about justice and compassion. But they simply weren’t willing to hear it. So God sent them another message – this time through James. And the message was this: You are all going to die. And when that time comes you aren’t going to be any better off than those you have neglected or mistreated because you thought them less important than yourselves.
Now the truth is that in one way or another, that particular word will come to each one of us. Both James and Jesus speak it in the readings today. We are all going to die, so we need to get over ourselves, we need to stop acting as though we’re in control of everything; that we can do whatever we want whenever we want; that we can place God in the background somewhere and decide when we will listen to the people he sends to us and when we won’t. For while we might resist it for a long time, at some point that word is going to break through -- we are going to die. And if, like those people James addressed in his letter, we have spent our lives ignoring God for the sake of doing whatever we want whenever we want, then we will be shaken to the core when that word comes, because we will realize that we have cut ourselves off from the only thing worth having – a relationship with the God who holds all life in his hands, and upon whom our lives depend.

This weekend our Holy Father, along with thousands of others including some from our own parish, is participating in the World Meeting of Families. One thing I’m sure that the Holy Father will tell them, because he has been telling us all along, is that the worst thing we can do to the little ones in our families is to live in such a way that it seems that our lives depend on things other than God. The worst thing we can do to the little ones in our families is to give them the impression that having lots of nice things, that going to lots of fun places, that playing lots of sports, or performing for large crowds -- are more important than God. Because when the word comes to them that they will die someday, and it could come at any time -- in something they hear or see on television or the net, or in the death a beloved relative or even a pet – when that word comes it will be terrifying. It will be terrifying because they won’t know that the One upon whom their lives depend is with them and for them, and has the power to renew their lives.

This is why Pope Francis is telling us that in addition to being open to listening to what God is speaking to us through others, it is essential that we accept the call to speak on his behalf. Now I know this isn’t easy because many of us feel we are unlikely spokespersons for God, perhaps as unlikely as that donkey that spoke to Balaam, because of our imperfections. But being a messenger for God doesn’t depend on our worthiness, or our competence -- but rather upon God’s grace.

Our Holy Father is telling us again and again that in our families, it is so important that we speak to one another about the love and mercy of God -- that we constantly remind each other that God is with us to help us because he wants us to have life and have it to the full – and that it is God’s great desire to share life with us forever. And having done this with our families, and with their support, we will find that it is possible to share this good news with others too.

And we will share it joyfully because we know that this is a word of hope that can change the world. We will share it joyfully because we know that the more the people of our world hear and embrace the good news that the love and mercy of God is available to all, the less people will be driven to live as though everything depends on them -- that they must secure their lives by gaining wealth and power through any means they can. We will share it joyfully because we know that the more the people of our world hear and embrace the good news that the love and mercy of God is available to all, the less they will be frightened when they are struck by the reality that they are going to die.

I know that this is how it has worked for me. There was a moment not too long ago when the reality that I will die someday hit me like a ton of bricks. And, quite honestly, in that moment I found myself filled with dread. But then I remembered the message God had sent to me though Carol on that day long ago. He wanted me to know that he loves me very much. And allowing this word to sink deep in me, I found the fear subsiding and being replaced with joy and peace.  

(Fr. Rod Damico  9/27/15)