

A young man went off to college with great expectations. After he had been in college for one month, he faxed his father, "Feather in my cap, I was just elected class president." Two months later, he sent another fax to his father: "Another feather in my cap: I just found out that I have been accepted into the best fraternity." One month later, a third fax: "Still another feather in my cap, I got the leading role in the class play."

One semester later, he sent a fax to his brother that read, "Flunked out, prepare father. Tell him to send money for me to get home!" The brother faxed him back: "Father prepared. Prepare yourself. Father says put those feathers on your shoulders and fly home!"

Like the young man in this story have you ever talked yourself into a similar situation? Sometimes the need to open our mouths, and show the world how clever we are, confirms just the opposite beyond any shadow of a doubt. Without even seeing it coming, we stick our foot right into our mouths. And often in the midst of our embarrassment we begin to wonder how, or why, we continually find ourselves in such an awkward, graceless, foolish-looking position?

The first answer that comes to mind, and one that is probably the greatest single cause of human stupidity is....Fear! We are afraid of others and afraid of ourselves. The young man at college was afraid to tell his father the truth about himself, afraid to admit that he found the workload heavy, the course work hard, the pace daunting. So, he devised his "feather" communications to project an image of his first experience at college; as lighthearted and carefree, successful and satisfying. Socially he was a feather, floating on the air of acceptance from one success to the next. Scholastically, he was a stone. Not all the feathers in the world could help him when he sank out of sight academically.

And yet, what might have happened to this young man if he had revealed his well-founded fear of academic failure to his father, instead of only communicating

about the fluff in his life? He might have discovered that he wasn't the only person ever to have a tough time adjusting to college life. He might even have discovered that his father had similarly struggled.

Fear is what St. Mark claims prompted Peter's silly offer to build three little temporary shelters or "booths" on the mountaintop during the Transfiguration event in our Gospel this morning. There is no doubt that Elijah and Moses were tremendously powerful, awe-inspiring prophets of God -- good reason for a healthy feeling of fear on Peter's part. And perhaps Jesus' harsh rebuke earlier, "Get behind me, Satan," still rang ominously in his ears.

In fact, as we consider all of the ways our fear can cause our imagination to run rampant, it isn't hard for us to imagine Peter wondering if perhaps Elijah and Moses knew how he had rejected Jesus' words about his death and ultimate resurrection? What if they found him hopelessly disobedient and completely unfit for discipleship? Both Elijah and Moses had sent to their deaths more than a few weak-spirited, wrong-headed troublemakers in their time. The fear that grips Peter's stomach apparently loosens his tongue and goads him into offering his odd suggestion.

Now, before we agonize over all the theological implications that may lie behind these "booths," consider for a moment what Peter is afraid of. Here is a simple fisherman, who has gotten into the middle of an enormously complex theological, political, and from the looks of it a very dramatic and life altering situation. It seems that every time Peter opens his mouth he says something wrong. Even when he says something right ("You are the Messiah") he is silenced. So, maybe in fear that he will once again say something out of line, Peter offers to do something useful; to use his hands to get some work done - - instead of his head. Unfortunately -- like most fear-motivated actions -- his plan to avoid saying something stupid backfires and he once again looks foolish.

Now...while fear of ourselves and of others may cause a large measure of our foot-in-mouth disease, there is another popular reason we open-up when we should just shut our mouths. That reason would be that we aren't always very fond of silence. Few things are as unsettling or as uncomfortable, to most of us, as standing around in the midst of other people with no one speaking. Silence is something we accept with grace only from those we love the most and trust the best. How many people can you simply sit next to in silence without feeling the weight of the air between you? With whom can you maintain silence when-walking on a quiet beach? - sitting in the car on a long ride? - waiting for that phone call with the lab report? - keeping vigil against a soul's dark night? -watching the sun come up?

If we are lucky, we can keep the silence with our husbands or wives. Even luckier still are those who are able to add a friend or two to this list. Silence is stillness, and keeping still involves taking a risk. When we're talking, we're moving; we're hard to grasp and hard to hold; we can still escape. But sitting in silence takes trust, it takes faith, it takes risking an openness that reveals our true self. This is what God wants. This is why the divine yearns for men and women to "be still and know that I am God."

In a way, Peter does succeed in avoiding another theological land mine by chattering on about his proposed construction project. At least this time when he is reprimanded, it is not for saying the wrong thing. When last he misspoke, Jesus likened Peter to Satan. This time the voice from the divinely-sent cloud makes no reference at all to the content of Peter's suggestion. In fact the voice is far more reassuring than it is judgmental. Instead of lambasting Peter for his silly suggestion, the voice only asks that Peter stay quiet -- that he listen to Jesus the "beloved son."

The third way we end up with a foot in our mouths is by trying to take control of a situation and have the last word. Of course, the more we long to take control, the more we realize just how dependent on others we actually are. Perhaps the most famous story about this very thing can be expressed in an illustration from the life of a Bishop named Fulton Sheen. It concerns a time when he was scheduled to speak at a gathering in Philadelphia. Unfamiliar with the city, Sheen nevertheless decided to walk from his hotel to the Town Hall, and in doing so he got hopelessly lost. Eventually he came across some young people talking and asked them to direct him to his destination. One of the kids asked Fulton, "What are you going to do there?" The Bishop replied, "I'm going to give a lecture on 'How to Get to Heaven.' Would you care to come along?" "Are you kidding?" said the kid. "You don't even know how to get to the Town Hall."

Peter's ill-considered attempt to take control of the mountaintop moment he experienced during the transfiguration, also led him far astray from his intended goal. Instead of getting his building project underway, Peter found himself under the cover of God's protective cloud. Instead of taking up a tidy, little construction task, Peter found himself taking on the enormous gift of a lifelong discipleship.

Although Peter sometimes gets a bad rap for: trying to prevent Jesus' death, for wanting to stay up on the mountain, for denying Jesus three times, and for almost drowning when he tried to walk on water; we also remember that with the help of the Holy Spirit he was able to fully recognize who Jesus truly was. In fact, there is a significant part in the speech at the empty tomb that is found only in Mark's version. "Go, tell his disciples **and Peter** that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." Throughout Mark, Peter may at times be portrayed as a bumbling idiot -- usually doing and saying the wrong things; but he is also highlighted as the one Jesus will build his church upon, and after the resurrection as one to whom Jesus will personally appear. It is then; that

Peter is finally "able to grasp the whole picture," that he finally begins to understand.

Only a joyless, heartless, relentless round of existence comes from always being the one in control. Relinquishing the reins of our lives to God, playing out our lives as genuine disciples of the transfigured Jesus, the transforming Christ, is the only way we can truly and fully experience the glory of the living Lord.

The reason mountaintop experiences stand out so dramatically is that those are exactly the moments when we are least in control and most in God. So, will you consider letting go of your fears, your words, and your desire for control? "Let's come down from the mountain and courageously embrace the abundant life God has in store for us." And perhaps, with the Lord's help, when we are finally able to do these things, we will experience our own kind of transfiguration in which we begin to reflect to others the very image and likeness of God. Amen.