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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
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Lectionary Year B: John 6:56-69

Some of my earliest childhood memories are of my Dad huddled over his amateur radio setup in my parents' bedroom in our Drayton, North Dakota home. Bear in mind that this was the late-1970s -- long before the explosion of the Internet -- and being a "ham radio" operator was quite the burgeoning hobby. Probably the strongest memories of my Dad's ham radio days are of the sounds. You had the bleeping of CW, which was all Morse code, along with the indescribable tinny squawk of sideband; the only sounds I remember being lifelike were on the two-meter band. Your typical two-meter rig looked and operated much like a CB radio...in fact, two of the Oldsmobiles that my parents owned had two-meter radios installed in them.

But, one mistake you never make around a ham radio operator is calling a two-meter rig a "CB." You will be sternly corrected for uttering such sacrilege in the presence of a trained, tested, and FCC-licensed amateur radio operator!

Part of the novelty of being a ham radio operator was -- again, prior to the explosion of the Internet -- the ability to communicate with people all around the world. This age I am remembering is one in which long-distance phone calls were terribly expensive; if you racked up a bunch of hours "reaching out and touching some-

one" forty years ago, your monthly phone bill would run into the hundreds of (non-inflation adjusted) dollars. You want instant messaging? Well, you'd better call Western Union and order a telegram for your intended recipient, because that's about your only option.

Except for ham radio...

Simple and inexpensive nation- and worldwide communication was, back then, the sole privilege of ham radio operators. Of course, one needed souvenirs of one's communication with these faraway folks, and those came in the form of QSL cards. Your typical QSL card was a postcard with the operator's call sign on it, along with the time, date, and signal strength of the transmission in which he or she participated. Then, a few days later, the card would arrive in the mail, whereupon one could proudly announce, "Here's my QSL card from the guy I talked to in Guam!"

Back in those days, I was absolutely fascinated by everything about Alaska, and one day -- I believe we were living in Crookston, Minnesota at the time -- my Dad was on the air with someone from Alaska. Naturally, I had to pester Dad to ask this person how things were in Alaska, weather-wise and such, and I, of course, remained alongside Dad the whole time he was on the air with someone from my favorite state in the union!

Now, if I want to see how things are in Alaska, I can just pull up the website for one of Anchorage's TV stations; right there will

be a webcam or a simulcast of the nightly news. I'm guessing that, had I grown up in this age, Alaska would've been far less fascinating and exotic because I could see it any time I wanted to.

Communication was definitely more concrete in those ham radio days. You actually spoke with strangers with your own voice, as opposed to typing text anonymously as is the case with social networking and other such media. You received an actual card in the mail that confirmed that what you did actually took place on the time, date, and location that you did it. As long as there was a clear signal, senders and recipients could communicate effectively enough to get their message through. Yes, it was crude by today's standards, but it worked.

When Jesus spoke to the disciples, it often seemed as if there was some sort of interference in the signal...as if that indescribable tinny squawk of sideband had faded off into oblivion. I remember that happening with Dad, too. In the disciples' case, their "reception" is perhaps clouded by stubbornness, ignorance, or a refusal to think outside the box. Listen again to what they said in our Gospel text: "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" (John 6:60b).

They had just heard Jesus' famous "bread of life" discourse, where Jesus refers to himself as food and drink...a radical assertion considering the connotations of cannibalism and the kosher laws

that his Jewish audiences would've adhered to:

But as we read further in the text, we find that the signal finally gets through to the disciples. Yes, we start out with questioning and complaining, and we even witness outright rejection. Recall the account telling us that "many of [Jesus'] disciples turned back and no longer went about with him" (John 6:66). Then, we get to Peter, who has an epiphany...the garbled sideband squawk finally becomes clear. He says to Jesus, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68-69).

Ultimately, there is something transformative happening here; we must acknowledge -- to use some worn-out jargon -- the "paradigm shift" that takes place between the outright rejection of Jesus' teaching to the acceptance of his teaching. But, seeing as how the language of "paradigm shift" is so worn out (and antiquated), I'd like to get us back to ham radio. That'll never be antiquated, right?

When, as a ham radio operator, you want your signal to come through more clearly, you can use a linear amplifier. In more familiar terms, you could think of just about any radio station, ham or otherwise. You know that, at 50,000 watts, WBBM in Chicago is going to reach a lot farther and more clearly than WRSW in Warsaw at 1,000 watts. With the linear amplifier, the ham radio operator merely makes a more powerful "radio station," hence the comparison.

So, with the weaker signal being transformed into a stronger signal, it may be transmitted farther distances and heard by more people. This transformation takes place thanks to electricity and vacuum tubes. But what about transformations like the one we witness in today's Gospel text? Well, electricity and vacuum tubes didn't exist back then, so that rules out the "stronger signal" I just described. But there was someone at work getting through to Peter, who transformed a bunch of garbled nothingness into something that made perfect sense.

We're talking about God here.

Peter can't take credit for "getting it" all on his own; rather, God was at work amplifying the signal that finally got through. We would be wise to consider, in our own spiritual journeys, the ways in which any epiphany -- any breakthrough -- is thanks to the persistent nudge of our Lord. Believe boldly that he is still at work communicating with you, amplifying that signal with the help of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, when you are in deepest doubt or unbelief, think of today's Gospel and of how this account stretches all the way from "who can accept it" to "we have come to believe" in just a few short verses. Such transformations are possible in flawed and ignorant folk like you and me who don't always receive the signal...

I never picked up on the amateur radio hobby. Someday, I might, though. Obviously, it had some kind of impact on how I think about communication, and, as is the case today, what it takes for

things to get through to people. But where electronics, bands, and wavelengths can explain how Dad was able to talk to a guy in Alaska, only God -- and faith in God -- can facilitate communication between God and his creatures. That's where my analogy breaks down...and yet I'm comfortable leaving it at that, because God's amplifier is so much better.

Amen.