

Rev. Dan Puchalla
Church of the Annunciation, Gurnee
March 31, 2019

One of the first questions most people have for me
when they meet me is, What's the origin of your last name?
Actually, before that, they ask how it's pronounced:
it's Puchalla -- just pretend the "c" isn't here.
Sometimes people like to guess what the nationality of Puchalla is.
Most often, people think it might be Italian,
every so often, someone will think it's Hawaiian.
But it's Polish.

Last Christmas, Raff and I did one of those DNA tests to find out our genetic heritages.
Raff's was this surprising mallange of African, Northern European, Southeast Asian.
I was kind of hoping there would be some surprise in my report, but no, just 100% pure Polish.

My Polish heritage has always been important to me.
And it first became important to me the very day
I first heard the term "Polack"
in the context of a joke
about how stupid Polish people are,
how docile and easily conquered.
I think I was about 7 years old.
It was on that day that my mom had to explain to me
about stereotypes and slurs,
and why people discriminate against Polish people.
She told me about how
my grandparents and great grandparents
had only been able to live
in certain neighborhoods in Chicago
because of their last names.

But that was also the day she told me about other names:
like Copernicus, the Polish mathematician
who was the first to work out that the Earth orbits the Sun.

That's when I learned about Madame Curie,
the Polish scientist who
was the first woman to win a Nobel prize,
and still the only person to receive Nobel prizes in two
different disciplines.

That's when I learned about Fredrick Chopin,
composer of some of the most gorgeous music
humanity has ever heard.

Now, you would think that surely
discrimination against Polish-Americans
is a thing of the past,
the trope of the Dumb and Docile Polack dead and buried.

A few years ago, though,
when I was working on a building project with someone
and we were selecting a contractor,
she said to me,

“Poles make such good laborers, don't they?”

Now, to me, there's no insult in being a good laborer;
but I suspected that the Dumb & Docile Polack
was lumbering behind this dubious compliment.

All I said in reply was,

“Yes, and we make pretty good scientists and musicians, too.”

Language matters.

There's a mountain of scientific research
showing how academic achievement among
students is hindered by the stereotypes
they carry about themselves.

In one such set of studies,
it was shown that if you give a group of African American students a
math test

and tell them, before they start,
that Black students usually do poorly on this test,
then they will do poorly on that test.

But if you give the same test to a group
of African American students
and tell them that this test isn't that hard,
they will perform as well or better

than other groups.

And you can replicate this with any other kind of group,
with women, with Latino students,
with poor white students
who have been labeled as White Trash.

Language matters. How we talk about one another matters.
How we talk *to* one another matters.

We might call all of these *annunciations*.

An annunciation is active speech,
it's when words create reality.

In the story of the Annunciation in Luke's gospel,
Gabriel's announcement to Mary
and her verbal consent is when
the Incarnation of Jesus happens.

In the speaking, it is done,
like at a wedding
when the priest says, "I now pronounce you..."
and suddenly you're married.

We receive annunciations all the time,
the words spoken to us
and the words we speak back
shape and reshape reality.

At the gym I go to, there's a bank of elliptical machines,
and in front of them are six tvs.

On one end, a tv is always playing Fox News
and on the other end a tv is always playing CNN,
and I always go for an elliptical in middle
because I don't want to watch either of them.

But every so often, my eye wanders over to one, then the other,
and it's amazing how they will be covering the same events,
the very same set of facts,
and yet the headline at the bottom of the screen
will be completely different,
will put completely different complexions on it,
tell a completely different story.

And it's all a matter of just a few words.
Moreover, the one thing they ever seem to agree on
 is that our country is in crisis
 and that everything is going to hell in a handbasket
 and it's all the fault of those other people.
These are the annunciations we receive every day.
These are the realities we are forced to live in
 because of the words that are spoken to us,
 and the words we find ourselves repeating to others.
And I don't know about you,
 but I don't think our world or country are any better for it,
 and certainly not our individual mental health.
So, on this Feast of the Annunciation,
I wonder if it's the work of the Church,
 both the big-C church
 and this particular church called Annunciation,
 is to be the church of *the* Annunciation.
What if we held all annunciations
 up to the standard and the model
 of *the* Annunciation?
What if we made all our annunciations
 sound like *the* Annunciation?

"Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you."
Those are the first words out of Gabriel's mouth.
Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you.

Imagine if you got Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump
 to greet each other like that.
What kind of conversations might follow
 if we speak the reality
 that the other person in front of me
 that I can't stand the sight of
 is a beloved creation and child of our common Creator?

“Do not be afraid, Mary.” That’s the next thing Gabriel says.
Do not be afraid.

And maybe a better translation ought to be

“I see that you’re afraid. But you don’t have to be.”

What would it look like if we started

all of our difficult conversations
by sharing our fears with one another.

What have you lost in the past

and you’re afraid of losing again?

What wounds are we carrying that need healing?

“Do not be afraid, Mary. Here’s what God has in store.”

What does it look like to move our conversations

from fear toward hope,
from defensiveness to openness,
from healing our wounds
to dreaming of new possibilities.
Daring, extravagant possibilities.

“How can this be?” Mary asks. These things you talk about seem great, but there’s no way they can actually happen, is there?

“Yes, they can,” Gabriel replies.

They can happen because the Holy Spirit will come upon you.

These things can happen because the Most High,

the Creator of the Universe, will enfold you and surround you
and be your shelter from whatever the world throws at you,
so that you don’t have to live your life in fear.

And if you believe *that*,

if you put your trust in *that*,

if you live in *that* reality,

then nothing will be impossible.

“Well, all right then!” Mary says. “Let’s do this thing. *I’m all in.*”

I remember there was a business negotiation book

that came out several years ago called,

Getting to Yes.

I’ve never read it, but I can’t imagine it improves upon

what Luke wrote down nearly two thousand years ago.

Because Mary's *yes* is not the end result of a negotiation,
Gabriel doesn't approach her as someone
he just needs to get agreement out of.
He doesn't use his words in order to maneuver Mary
into an offer she can't refuse,
like playing a chess game.
He uses his words to create with her a shared reality
that *she doesn't want to refuse*.

If our work is to transform all our annunciations
into conversations more like *The Annunciation*,
then we have our work cut out for us.
It's so hard not to default
into words that harm, words that hurt,
words that curse rather than bless.
It's so hard not to return harm for harm,
to return aggression for aggression.
It's so hard not to have conversations
where we smash up against each other,
like a head-on collision on the interstate --
and then how do we pick ourselves up from that?

The Good News is that the Annunciation to Mary
was not just the announcement
that she would give birth to a baby.
The Good News is that she would give birth to Forgiveness,
she would give birth to Mercy, to Grace, and to Reconciliation.
The Good News is that she would give birth to the possibility
that even in the trainwreck of our hurt and hatred,
the Love of God can always rise again.
The Good News is that Mary gives birth
to the constant possibility of a new birth,
a new start with one another.

Amen.