

How We Talk with God

My earliest recollections of barbers are vague images of a bald man with a kindly face and glasses - maybe his name was Ernie - who cut my father's hair, and so had the inside track on his sons. Going to the barber's was a family excursion and was repeated for several years. I don't remember when I switched (or was switched) to Stanley although the change was significant. I could walk by myself to Stanley's, and later I was responsible for getting my younger brothers to his shop for their cuts. More importantly for me, Stanley subscribed to a few series of comic books. Since I was forbidden to have or read these comics at home, Stanley's was a sort of Reading Room for me - I hope the Christian Scientists excuse me for putting it that way. I never minded if there was a long wait. That provided me with that much more time to read and to soak in the atmosphere of the barber shop.

In the shop, there was a peculiarity that was very attractive and a sameness that was very comforting. There were smells and sounds which could not be found anywhere else: the soap, the aftershave, the hair tonics, the steady snipping of scissors, the pumping of the chair for height, a new set of people different from my family or my classmates. But there was a sameness as well: the way you entered the shop, the same greeting: "How's your mother? Is your father drunk?" (Stanley knew my father, who did not drink, from his mail route), a prescribed way of sitting and waiting, and a limited range of subject matter for conversation (sports, changes in the neighborhood), the way one got on and off the chair and then paid. There was much that could be relied upon, that would always be the same no matter how many times I went in for a haircut.

Stanley retired at the beginning of my college years, and I wandered for a while without a regular barber. It didn't matter in those days: those were the late '60's early '70's and we were not cutting our hair anyway. When it came time to go off to graduate school in Belgium, I was doing before-departure-things like going to the dentist and doctor, buying clothes and toiletries. I must have thought they didn't have anything like that in Belgium! So, I wanted to get a haircut, too, and that was the first time I went to Vito's. From that first time, I probably visited Vito over 200 times through the next thirty years.

Every visit was pretty much the same. The unique barbershop ambience was there to be sure, as was the dependable routine. Vito looked up from the head in the chair, said, "Hello," and resumed cutting while I chose an issue of *Esquire* magazine I haven't read before, eyed everyone who was waiting so I would know when my turn would be, and took a seat preferably not facing the television so that it wouldn't distract me - no one really paid attention to the television in Vito's.

We were all men. Once in a great while, a woman came into the shop - bringing a son for a haircut, presumably - and this threw off the life force of the barbershop. The woman would even talk to another one of her children or to Vito himself. This was exceedingly distracting because normally there was little conversation in Vito's. He had a pre-determined verbal exchange with each customer and only rarely spoke across the room to a waiting customer. Customers barely exchanged glances never mind words. This was the protocol at Vito's; men know it instinctively.

Even if a man were new to Vito's, he would know enough to keep his mouth shut. Women were not tuned into this at all.

When it would be my turn, there was no need to give Vito instructions: he knew how to cut my hair. He asked precisely three questions - the same questions each visit - spacing the questions out to cover the time of the haircut: "You still working in the same place.?" "Still live in Mt. Pleasant?" "How's your father?" (my father and I went to the same barber). My answers were the same each time: "Yes." "Yes." "Doing well." There was an awkward silence the visit after I had moved out of Mt. Pleasant. There was an even bigger silence when I had left the priesthood. Vito is a flexible man, however, and made the necessary adjustments. At the end of the haircut, he always said, "Don't forget your glasses," even though I have never forgotten them, nor could I forget them because I'm blind as a bat. I handed him money while the next customer got in the chair, and I exited with a simple goodbye. The same experience. For over thirty years. On a regular basis. At least 200 if not 250 times.

I did not have an intimate relationship with Vito. I had known him longer than I had known my wife. I saw him more regularly than I saw my close friends. He was a constant in my life. But I was not intimate with him. I didn't know where he came from. I didn't know his family. I didn't know what he thought or felt about being a barber or about anything for that matter. He didn't have a clue about how I handled my mother's death or falling in love or changing careers. I was not intimate with Vito. But I didn't want to be. I just wanted him to cut my hair and do a decent job. He didn't want to share anything further with me, either. He just wanted me to keep coming every six weeks and to bring my son if I were to have one. That was it.

We have a lot of relationships like I had with Vito. They are functional relationships, very necessary but, by mutual preference, shallow and mechanical. The gas station attendant. Bank teller. Counter person at the coffee shop. Dentist. God, maybe?

Vito could easily be God and his barbershop the church, a place to which we go regularly and routinely. There is something uniquely attractive about the place of worship and we can follow a comforting ritual without too much thought. We often see the same people there but have no relationship with them except to nod a greeting to them on Sundays. The motions, postures and words remain the same from visit to visit, and don't break certain boundaries which everyone respects. We even mouth the same phrases to God and "hear" the same messages from him time after time.

Even if we do not go to church, our relationship with God may be like this: not antagonistic or hostile to be sure, but routine and mechanical. The relationship serves a certain limited function in our lives but has no real depth. It certainly would not be described as intimate.

This kind of relationship works fine with our barber or hairdresser and the bank teller; we and they are content to leave the relationship on a superficial level. It will not, however, work with God. Although we may be content to leave it on automatic pilot, God desires something very different, the kind of relationship we may have with only a few people, if with any: a relationship in which he reveals himself to us and we reveal ourselves to him, a relationship which changes and redeems us, a relationship which drags us into God's work of saving the world he created.

“Yes,” “Yes,” “Doing well,” or even “Take a little off the top,” will not satisfy God. The sort of relationship God desires will lead us well beyond the superficial or the ordinary.

So, how we talk with God depends on what sort of relationship we want with God. If you are OK with the mechanical, then go with that. It is not the kind of relationship God desires, but God pretty much leaves it up to us. If you want a deeper, broader relationship, that requires four fundamentals.

First, we talk with God without fear. At least in the Christian tradition, God has been clearly defined: “God is Love.” (I John 4:8) Years before that letter of John was written, Jesus was urging people to pray and pointed out God’s attitude toward us: “If you, with all your sins, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to anyone who asks him.” (Matthew 7: 11) God loves us. That does not change. We may think we are undeserving of that love. We may think we have betrayed that love. We may have ignored that love and God himself. God’s love is not diminished or conditional. We can open ourselves to God. We can say things to God that we can only say to someone we know loves us.

Second, our talk must be honest. Sharing the truth about ourselves and our lives is not for God’s sake; it is for our own sakes. God knows us already. Being honest in our talk with God enables us to be honest with ourselves. Without honesty, our prayer is cheap talk.

Third, our talk need not be fancy. Maybe there are formal prayers we know or prayers we learned in childhood that express what we want to say. Use those prayers. Or maybe we have things to say but do not know exactly how to say them. Just blurt them out. Paul in his letter to the Romans assures us, “The Spirit, too, helps us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought; but the Spirit himself makes intercession for us.” (Romans 8:26)

Finally, leave some space for God to speak. God’s messages come to us in a variety of ways. Through people we know or even strangers. Through nature or the world around us. Through things we read or see or hear. Through interior sensibilities: thoughts or feelings that we eventually recognize as coming from outside of us, as something holy.