

When we get into an argument with someone, it's usually for some good reasons: We care about the topic under discussion, and we actually care about the person with whom we're arguing. It may not feel like it, but we usually do wish the other person would see it our way not just for our benefit but for theirs. We think it would make them a better person.

Jesus gives all kinds of advice about resolving conflict – work it out personally, get a little help, get a lot of help, and if all else fails, let it go. His advice presumes that the other person is wrong. In reality, of course, that is not always the problem. Sometimes we are wrong. And sometimes no one is wrong – we just have not communicated very clearly. When we object, “that person doesn't listen to me,” the truth may be, “I have not spoken clearly to that person.” How we communicate is just as important as what we say. Electronic messaging keeps people amazingly well connected, but I have always found that email is a lousy medium if you are really trying to resolve an argument. Texting and messaging on social web sites are just as bad. These are great ways to stay in touch – I'm using Facebook and Twitter to keep people up to date on things in the parish and in my life. However, if I need to get a problem resolved, phone calls are better, and it's often best to see the individual in person. Even then, speaking clearly matters as much as listening carefully.

Hearing how two people might reach an agreement gives us confidence. However, today's responsorial psalm pulls us up short. This psalm is not about how frustrating it is for us to get along with hardheads, but about how frustrating it is for God to get along with us. Every version of this psalm I've ever seen uses this expression, “If today you hear God's voice, harden not your hearts,” so that must be a good translation of whatever it says in the original Hebrew written 3000 years ago. But I think a better translation for our culture today would be, “If today you hear God's voice, harden not your heads.” We use the word “hard-hearted” for someone who is cruel, but that's not what this verse is about. It's about people who are hardheaded. We sometimes call them pig-headed, but I know when I get stubborn, people get along better with pigs than they do with me.

Psalm 95 recalls an incident during Israel's Exodus from Egypt when the chosen people complained about the lack of water in the desert. The complaints led Moses to provide water from the rock, but they also led God to conclude, “These people still don't trust me. After generations of the covenant, after 10 plagues in Egypt, after parting the Red Sea, they still think I won't take care of them.” The Israelites were not hardhearted people; they were hardheaded.

The lectionary gives us a gospel about arguing with people, but slips in this psalm about arguing with God and invites us to sing merrily along. It's a trick. As much as we would like other people to quit arguing with us, this psalm suggests maybe we should quit arguing with God. We still do, and God knows, every argument happens because we care about the topic under discussion and about the one taking the other side. God does love us, even when it may not feel like it. When we disagree with God, God is probably hoping we would start to see things a different way.