



WORDS MATTER

August 20, 2017, Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 15:10-20

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Holy God, seeking clarity and direction, we come to Your Scriptures. Open our hearts to hear and live your Word. We acknowledge our discord, our hurtful speech; open our hearts to hear and live your Word. You who spoke our lives into being, realign our faith towards you and direct us as we listen to Your Son. In the name of Jesus, open our hearts to hear and live your Word. Amen.

This summer, much belatedly, I've been putting together my son's photo book of his first year of life. I've been going through all the pictures, choosing all of his "firsts" to highlight, and as he is now 2 years old, I've been able to look back on all the things he's accomplished. One of the things parents almost always record is their baby's first word. Do you know what yours was? Furthermore, do you remember what words you spoke after "momma" and "dada"? Do you remember, or did your parents tell you, about the first time you strung together those important three words, "I love you"? Or, more scandalously, do you remember the first time you said a bad word?

Flannery O'Connor, the famous Southern author, tells a short story about a ten-year-old boy traipsing into the woods to shoot his first turkey.¹ He's looking to prove himself, but after smashing his glasses and tearing his clothes, he misses his chance. The boy blames God for another of his unfair misfortunes, and cusses out loud for the first time. He does it again, in the emptiness of the woods, this time more harshly. Then he tries it several more times, each time with more force. Giggles begin to erupt in his belly as he finds joy in this devious behavior. The boy

¹ "An Afternoon in the Woods," *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works*, Library of America, 1988.



waits for punishment, lightning from the sky, but it doesn't come ... except from within. "What he had thought of was blasphemy...he had never thought before how accessible it was to him. His mouth turned up slightly, and then down again, one corner at a time, like a scale balancing his cheeks. He looked as if he were undecided whether to giggle...or cry."²

As this 10-year-old boy discovers, our words—the good and the bad—matter. Our words form us. Whether we use them to uplift, hurt or destroy, our words describe the world around us. They give us meaning and direction. As children learn speech, they begin to give shape to their reality. Words help us understand what is familiar, what is different. Words identify what we eat, whom we know and where we live. As we build relationships, our words form connections, but they can also create divisions. For better and for worse, the words we use shape our reality.

Jesus, of course, understands just how much our words matter. When we meet our Lord today, he's just been critiqued by the Pharisees for not upholding the purity laws as they would have, which include hand washing and distinguishing between clean and unclean food. For the people of Israel, what is called clean and unclean helps maintain holiness, and holiness is their mandate from God. But Jesus sees this critique as focusing on the ritual more than on the intent. And as has happened before, Jesus takes the critique and twists it, insisting that all the hand washing in the world will not provide the holiness these Pharisees desire. Holiness within can be reflected by following the law, but it is a person's faith, not their ritual, that reveals their holiness. Before he is done, Jesus then says one more thing. In a harsh tone, he reminds us that our words, what comes out of our mouths, are what most often reveal just how holy we are. "It is not what goes in the mouth that defiles, but what comes out of it," Jesus says. Words matter.

We are a people, when we go back to Genesis 1, who have been created by speech.³ In the beginning, in the midst of darkness and chaos, God spoke creation into being. God said, "Let there be light" and there was light. This teaches us

² Ibid, p. 767.

³ I am borrowing the line of this thinking in Genesis from a sermon on deceit the Rev. B.J. Hutto, delivered at Madison Avenue Baptist Church in Manhattan: <http://mabcnyc.org/podcast/true-words-true-word/>



something fundamental about the world that we live in: woven into the very logic of creation is God's speech. Our world, according to Scripture, begins with God's words. As God continues this beautiful creation, on the 6th day God creates humanity, and we are created in God's own image. And because we are made in the image of the one who speaks, we are given one of God's greatest gifts—speech itself. All animals have their way of communicating, but we humans have speech. We get to write, sing, compose, converse and communicate through words. As I already mentioned, words form and shape our reality, and they are a gift. Speech is a great and holy gift, one that mirrors God's good creation.

But unfortunately the gift of speech is not a gift we humans have cared for as we should. We have taken the speech God has given us and distorted it—through lies, through gossip, through insults and through hateful language. Look no further than the events of last weekend in Charlottesville to see the power of speech used in abusive ways. The slogans and chants of neo-Nazis, the words written on the flags, t-shirts and hats of white supremacists are an abuse of God's gift of language. As the pastor at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church here in the city, Scott Black Johnston, said to his congregation: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me... [which is] a lie... When sticks and stones get picked up, it is... because of words."⁴

Friends, words twist our understanding of creation, of each other, and words have the power to destroy. Therefore, we must use our God-given speech to denounce and reject words of hatred. We must use our words to truthfully call evil actions evil and avoid any attempt to defend or rationalize them. As people of faith, we must use our speech to speak out against anyone who rejects God's good creation and the gospel truth that all have been made in the image of God.

So back to the Bible. The gift and abuse of speech continue after creation. When God creates Adam and Eve, God speaks directly to them, forming their relationship through the spoken word. And when they disobey, it's because of the deceptive speech of the serpent. When God chooses to punish the peoples of the

⁴ Johnston's address to FAPC: <http://www.fapc.org/news/charlottesville-a-special-message-from-the-senior-pastor>.



earth, God confuses their speech at Babel. But on Pentecost, God reverses this punishment by uniting the peoples of the world across their multiple languages so they come together as one Church.

Today we see Jesus reference both this gift of speech and the damage it can cause—it's what comes out of the mouth that can defile. The Letter of James makes this point more clearly:

“How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.”⁵

With our mouths, James acknowledges, we bless and we curse. Now, yes, James's description is a little flamboyant, but it's hard to disagree. We use our words to love, to care and to show compassion. But we also use them to hate, to put down, and to destroy. Our words have power. The gift of speech is a gift from God, one that creates and destroys. And, my friends, every time we choose to use our words to destroy, we reject God's good creation.

So, for the Christian, it is not enough to say “actions speak louder than words.” Because words matter; it was through speech that God created and through Jesus' ministry that God proclaimed. In Jesus' ministry, he calms the storm through words. He drives out demons through words. Jesus forgives sinners through words. Just after our text for today, Jesus heals the Canaanite woman's daughter through his words. Even his dying breath is performative. Through it he offers healing, forgiveness, safety, and new life to those who are crucifying him...to those who are using their words to mock and abuse him.

Words matter in our lives because our lives are called to reflect the life and ministry of Jesus. To quote Rev. Jill Duffield, the editor of the *Presbyterian*

⁵ James 3:5-9.



Outlook, “words create worlds. Words shape understanding. Words are the currency of relationships. Words are never enough, but they are nonetheless critical.”⁶ My friends, our words as people of faith matter. It is through them that we can share God’s gift of loving speech, and it is through them that we can destroy God’s creation. Words can set a blaze, but they can also cool the flames.

Once, on a Baptism Sunday at Brick Church, when I was greeting folks by the side door after worship, a ten-year-old child came to me and asked why we talk about evil when we baptize our children each month. I stopped and had to think about when we do that in the service, and I realized that the child heard the promise we ask parents to make at their children’s baptisms: “Do you renounce all evil, and powers in the world which defy God’s love and righteousness?” The answer for parents is “I renounce them” and the response is purposefully different than the other questions we ask. This particular child was listening! Each Baptism Sunday, we ask this ancient question because to pronounce faith in Jesus is to reject the power of any evil in this world that defies God’s love and justice. It’s a public profession and the way in which parents, and all of us in fact, use our speech to reject evil and profess faith in God.

So what words are we called to proclaim today in the midst of our divisive culture? First, as those who have been created by speech and gifted with speech, we must reject any words that put down, hurt or insult any one of God’s children. Any speech that seeks harm to another, whether lies, hatred or slander, we have to renounce. This is most important when words of hate are spoken by people who claim to follow our Lord. We are called to reflect the beauty of God’s creation through our very speech; and rejecting evil, in all its forms, is one of the ways we use our God-given gift of speech to follow Jesus.

Today, I ask you all, and I include myself in this, to reject, publicly, any evil speech in this world that goes against God’s beautiful creation. Our world is clamoring with voices, filled with talking heads, and our speech needs to be clear as followers of Jesus. Speech is a gift, one we must take seriously. Join me; there is much work to be done.

⁶ Jill Duffield <http://pres-outlook.org/2017/08/words-gods-word-reflection-charlottesville/>



In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.