

“The Power of Words”

“Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.”

As we were adjusting to the new experience of preaching to a web camera and posting sermons online, one of my seminary classmates reminded me of the experience of preaching on camera in our homiletics class. We would gather in the basement studio of Hagan Hall to have our sermons videotaped, and then sit in horror watching ourselves onscreen and having our sermons critiqued and dissected. It was one of the most humbling experiences of my seminary years, and I earnestly hope that those videotapes were destroyed years ago!

While I have become accustomed to seeing and hearing myself online over these past several months, I still find it an experience that can at times be both disconcerting and illuminating. When I watch the sermons after I’ve recorded them (mostly to make sure that the recording went well) I often notice things that I’ve said or the way I have phrased a sentence that comes across as either confusing or incorrect. I don’t remember making an intentional decision to make such errors, but seeing and hearing them coming out of my mouth is a good lesson for me in being careful in what I say, because the power of words can be used for tremendous good or can be very damaging if not carefully employed.

Today’s Gospel offers an important lesson in the power of words and the damage that hurtful words can inflict on others. It is a two-part episode in Matthew that begins with Jesus calling the crowds to him and instructing them that *“it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.”* (15:11). Jesus is making reference to the dietary laws in the Torah that govern what the Jewish people eat to this day; observant Jews are very careful as to what foods they eat and what foods are to be avoided (the reason why many kosher restaurants will not serve meat and dairy on the same plate). The central issue for Jesus is what defiles, what makes a person ritually unclean and therefore separates them from the holy community and the holiness of God. While Jesus is not advocating the abolishing of these dietary laws (in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus stated *“do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”* – Matthew 5:17) he is warning of the tremendous damage that can be inflicted through what comes out of the heart through the mouth; true defilement is incurred by what emerges from a person rather than by what he or she ingests. True defilement comes from inside of a person, from the evil thoughts and intentions of the heart; these include *“evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, [and] slander”* (15:19), a “vice catalogue” which belongs to a category of early Christian instruction adapted from Hellenistic Judaism with many New Testament examples:

- “They are filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.” – Romans 1:29-31.
- “You have already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry.” – 1 Peter 4:3.

While the commandments of the Torah are not irrelevant, it is “*these that what defile a person*” (15:20); “*uncleanness is thus defined in ethical rather than ritual terms; it is not the result of ingesting something impure but a consequence of transgressing the moral commandments of God.*” (Curtis Mitch & Edward Sri). While it may appear that the second episode in our Gospel lesson has no connection with this teaching, we may be seeing Jesus demonstrating the consequences of what comes out of one’s mouth in his encounter with the Canaanite woman in the district of Tyre and Sidon. Again Jesus’ response to the threatening Pharisees of the previous story (“*Do you know that the Pharisees took offence when they heard what you said?*” – 15:12) is to withdraw, this time to Gentile territory to the north of Israel (modern-day Lebanon). No sooner does he arrive in this region than he is confronted by a Canaanite woman (identified in Mark as “*a Gentile, of Syrophenician origin*” (Mark 7:26) who comes out and starts shouting “*Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon*” (15:22). The words of her address demonstrate the Canaanite woman’s knowledge of Jesus’ power and willingness to show mercy to all who approach him (which he demonstrates in the Feeding of the Five Thousand in the previous chapter). Addressing Jesus as “*Lord*” and “*Son of David*” shows her respect for Jesus as a rabbi and as the Jewish Messiah, and her request on behalf of her daughter indicates that “*she expects something to happen at the intersection of her intercession and Jesus’ mercy*” (Mitzi J. Smith).

While the woman’s request is both respectful and sincere, Jesus’ response is puzzling: “*But he did not answer her at all.*” (15:23). His disciples are likewise unsympathetic, urging Jesus to send her away, “*for she keeps shouting at us.*” When he does respond, he appears to be acquiescing to the disciples’ request: “*I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*” (15:24), repeating his instruction to the Twelve to “*go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*” (10:5-6). Jesus seems to have no compassion for this woman and her daughter’s plight as he had for the crowds who greeting him on the shore of the Sea of Galilee; when he saw that crowd, “*he had compassion for them and cured their sick.*” (14:14). Jesus appears to have left this compassion behind when he crossed the border into the district of Tyre and Sidon.

But the Canaanite woman is a person who is not easily dismissed, nor will she take “no” for an answer. Undeterred by this initial rejection, “*she came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’*” (15:25). In the kneeling position of worship, she continues to address her psalm-like petition to Jesus, again recognizing him as “*Lord.*” But while Jesus finally addresses her directly for the first time, what he says is both shocking and confusing: “*It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.*” (15:26). How could anyone – especially Jesus! – be so cruel and heartless to refer to the woman and her people as “*dogs*” as if they were less-than-human and unworthy of the blessings that appear to be exclusively for only certain people, i.e. Jesus’ people? In her hour of need, so desperate to save her daughter’s life that she places herself in a subservient position at Jesus’ feet, how would the one who birth was hailed as “*good news of great joy for all the people*” (Luke 2:10) dismiss her because she is from the wrong group of people and therefore not worthy of blessings that appear to not be for “*all the people*”?

But even this shocking and insulting statement does not deter the Canaanite woman. Seemingly unresentful of the analogy, she persists, and in the framework of Jesus’ statement continues to plead her case: “*Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table*” (15:27). This answer may be rooted in the cultural difference between Jewish and Gentile households; in antiquity, Greeks and other Gentiles had a more familiar relationship with household pets than did Jewish families. Dogs may have been beloved household pets in Tyre and Sidon that were fed from under the table than would have been the case in many Jewish households. “*The Canaanite woman’s cultural context differs from Jesus’; they allow their pets to be fed while the children eat. One can feed the children and feed the pets too!*”

(Smith). This response appears to change Jesus' mind and his perspective toward the Canaanite woman, for now he proclaims "*woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish. And her daughter was healed instantly.*" (15:28).

We can look at this confusing story in several ways. It can be seen as a case of "all's well that ends well," because in the end the Canaanite woman received the healing for her daughter. It can be seen as a case of persistence in prayer, of petitioning the Lord unceasingly until our prayers receive their desired answer. For Martin Luther, this story is a means through which our faith is tested and strengthened:

- "This shows how our heart should stand firm in the midst of temptations, for as hard as we feel him, so Christ feigns to be. Our heart hears and understands nothing but "No," and yet it is not "No." Therefore sweep your heart clean of such feelings and trust firmly in God's Word and grasp from above and from underneath the "No" the deeply hidden "Yes," and hold on to it as this woman did and keep a firm belief in God's justice. Then you have won and caught him with his own words."

There are problems, however, with each of these explanations for what appears to be beyond explanation. We can certainly rejoice that the woman's daughter is freed from her affliction – but why does Jesus make her go through such a humiliating ordeal before granting healing? We can certainly commend her for persistence – but doesn't Jesus also teach in the Sermon on the Mount for us to "*ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you*" (7:7) and invites us to consider how much more loving our heavenly Father is toward his children than even the most loving of human parents:

- "Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you, then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" – 7:9-11.

Luther's explanation appears to reduce this episode to some sort of twisted game in which a desperate parent is forced to enter into a game of wits so that she might catch Jesus "with his own words" and prevail; but why should anyone be expected to endure such a torturous ordeal to gain the healing that anyone – especially our God of steadfast love – should desire for God's children in the first place?

Before we emulate Thomas Jefferson in taking a razor blade to this section of the Bible, there is another way in which we can look upon this incident. Having taught that "*what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and that is what defiles*" (15:18), Jesus may be demonstrating the devastating affects of such callous speech to his students, reinforcing the teaching that those who would be Jesus' followers must take great care because words have power that can be used to build up or to tear down, to unite or to divide, to include or to exclude. While it is true that God's focus is on the people of Israel throughout the Old Testament, we must also remember that the covenant God makes with Abraham promises that "*I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing ... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*" (Genesis 12:2-3). God promises through Isaiah that "*the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.*" (Isaiah 40:5). As he holds the long-awaited Messiah, Simeon praises God "*for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.*" (Luke 2:30-32). Our Risen Lord's commission to his disciples at the end of Matthew is to "*go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of*

the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (28:19). It is clear throughout Scripture that God's love is for all people, that no one is considered unworthy to gather at the table of the Lord, that we should look upon all people not as inhuman or inferior but beloved children of God who have a place among God's people because of their incorporation into the Church which is the Body of Christ. If we are shocked when we hear Jesus speak such harsh words, the challenge for us is to ask if we have ever spoken similar words, ignored or dismissed someone who is different from us, erected walls and set up rules that deprive people of their rightful place at the table of the Lord. If we are shocked by what Jesus says, we need to ask ourselves: have I said something similar? Are my words a source of comfort or of distress? Am I using the power of the words Christ has given me to fulfill his will to unite humanity under Christ's gracious reign, or to keep people divided and filled with hate toward others which is the will and work of Satan? If I am shocked by the words Jesus uses, am I also equally careful that I am not casually using such words in my encounters with others?

- "The story serves to challenge the sexism and racism of readers, ancient and modern, who tend not only to consider those of different gender and ethnicity as 'the other,' somehow more distant from God and the divine order and plan than our own group ... The story invites readers to place themselves in the role of the other, to struggle not only with God but also with our perceptions of the other and pronounces such enduring struggle to be great faith." – M. Eugene Boring.

The rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in the USA has challenged me to consider the language that I may have used toward those who were "different" from me, those from whom I was divided in the segregated community in which I was raised. I grew up hearing horrible words spoken about the African Americans from who we were always divided, and rarely had an opportunity to get to know these persons as the uniquely gifted and beloved individuals God created them to be. While I don't have the video recordings that I can study, I know that in the past the words that have come from my mouth were often as shocking as those with which Jesus confronts us in his encounter with woman on the "other side," and I need both to repent of the harmful language that came from my mouth and be mindful that every word I speak can be used for good or for harm. As a child of God as a pastor of the church of Jesus Christ, the words I speak have great power; in the words of the psalmist, "*let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.*" (Psalm 19:14).

- "Now our Father is and is called merciful and good, as Christ says, 'Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful' (Luke 6:35). He also says, 'Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart' (Matthew 11:29) ... And since we are baptized into these names and are consecrated and hallowed by them, and since they have thus become our names, it follows that God's children should be called and also be gentle, merciful, chaste, just, truthful, guileless, friendly, peaceful, and kindly disposed toward all, even toward our enemies. For the name of God, in which we were baptized, works all this in us." – Martin Luther, 1519.

As God's holy people, we are called to proclaim the love of God and share God's liberating word. We are sent forth as ambassadors of Christ, the embodiment of Christ's love. May every word that proceeds from our mouths – whether we hear them played back to us or not – be used to build up God's loving reign, bless all people, and proclaim the light of Christ that shines in the darkness through the power of the Word that is Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.