

“Words That Defile”

“But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and that is what defiles.”

One day, a woman who was a member of my congregation on Long Island came up to me after worship to share the good news that she and her boyfriend had gotten engaged and would like to set a date for their wedding. After congratulating her on this wonderful news, I got my datebook to look at the date that they were considering for their marriage service; but before I even opened my book, she told me that “I have an unusual request.” In my experience over the years, this could mean any of a variety of scenarios, so I was prepared for anything she might tell me. But I cannot say I was ready to hear this request: “We want to get married at Citi Field.” I must admit that this caught me by surprise; Citi Field is the home of the New York Mets, and while I knew that she and her now-fiancé were devoted Mets fans, I never knew that someone would even consider getting married at a baseball stadium. But as we met and began to prepare for the service, it became clear that they had thought this through in great detail and were working with team officials to make it possible. So on the day of their wedding, we gathered behind home plate as the wedding guests sat in the stands while the bride and her father came in through the tunnel where the players enter the field to join the groom and wedding party at home plate, where with their promises they joined themselves to one another as husband and wife. It was a most memorable service, and to the best of my recollection no one heckled the couple as Mets fans are prone to do when their team is not performing well!

As I was preparing for this most unique wedding ceremony, I began to think of appropriate words to share on such an occasion, until I remembered a routine that George Carlin would share about the difference between baseball and football. It was not only one that I thought was fitting for this occasion (his final line is that the purpose of baseball is to go home, which fit perfectly into my sermon about the home that this bride and groom were creating on this day). Not only was this George Carlin routine appropriate for this particular wedding, but it was one of the few routines of this comedian that I could share in a worship setting, since most of George Carlin’s monologues were filled with words that cannot be repeated in most settings. Carlin even played on this propensity of his to use “dirty words” in one of his most famous routines, “The Seven Words You Can’t Say on Television.” Needless to say, I cannot repeat these words here or anywhere else, but it does raise

the point that there are words that we dare not repeat in certain situations due to their controversial and even hurtful nature. Even though we hear more of this language in everyday life than in the past, there is still something about these “dirty words” that makes them taboo and unwelcome in most situations, a reminder of the fact that words can be very hurtful and destructive, that certain words can destroy relationships and make engaging with persons who use such words difficult. Unlike physical wounds that can heal and may at worst leave physical scars, harmful speech *“penetrates the mind and spirit, fracturing relationships, dismantling trust, and altering human behavior permanently.”* (Paula Marsteller). As the Apostle James warns in the letter that bears his name, *“the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our member 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.”* (James 3:6).

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus warns both his disciples and the crowds of the dangers of words that can defile both human relationships and our relationship with God far more than any acts of defilement as prescribed in the Torah. This teaching comes after yet another encounter with the Pharisees who criticize Jesus for not living up to their standards regarding proper observance of the Law of Moses, in this case the fact that they believe that Jesus’ disciples are not washing their hands properly: *“Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.”* (Matthew 15:2). While there are regulations in the Torah regarding the manner in which priests were to wash their hands and feet as part of the ritual purification for ministering in the tabernacle (*“They shall wash their hands and their feet, so that they may not die; it shall be a perpetual ordinance for them, for him and for his descendants throughout their generations.”* – Exodus 30:21), the Pharisees adapted his priestly practice for themselves and attempted to enforce this practice among their followers. But Jesus refuses to follow their demands and instead condemns them for their hypocrisy, quoting the prophet Isaiah who declared that *“this people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.”* (Matthew 15:8-9; Isaiah 29:13).

While Jesus’ words in response to the accusations of the Pharisees are harsh, he has not given up on the crowds understanding and following his message. He calls the crowds and encourages them to *“listen and understand”* what truly “defiles” a person, what makes one ritually unclean, separating one from the holy community and the holiness of God. Jesus is not interested in nullifying the laws of the Torah regarding ritual defilement; in the Sermon of the Mount, he clearly states that *“I have come not to abolish the law but to fulfill”* (Matthew 5:17). What Jesus emphasizes is the importance of the inner commitments of the heart over against the

ritual commandments upon which the Pharisees focus: *“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). True defilement is incurred by what emerges from a person, rather than what he or she ingests. As the prophet Hosea proclaimed that the Lord desires *“steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God and not burnt offerings”* (Hosea 6:6), God makes mercy more important than sacrifice without abolishing the latter (*“Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy not sacrifice.’ For I have come not to call the righteous but sinners.”* – 9:13).

After his teaching to the crowds in reaction to the critique of the Pharisees, Jesus’ disciples approach him to inform their Lord of the offense the Pharisees took at his statements: *“Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?”* – 15:12). In response, Jesus pictures the Pharisees not as God’s planting but as the work of the devil and counsels his disciples to leave them alone for God to judge them in the fullness of time: *“Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind.”* (15:13-14). The Pharisees are blind guides that lead themselves and their followers into a pit of judgment and destruction.

Apparently, this parable leads to confusion among the disciples as Peter steps forward and asks on behalf of his colleagues that Jesus *“explain this parable to us”* (15:15). Jesus explains that what goes into a person by mouth *“enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer”* (15:17). True defilement comes from inside a person, from evil thoughts and intentions of the heart: *“But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles”* (15:18). Uncleanliness is thus defined in ethical terms rather than ritual terms: *“it is not the result of ingesting something impure put a consequence of transgressing the moral commandments of God”* (Curtis Mitch and Edward Sri). Jesus lists what is known as a “vice catalogue” common in Hellenistic Judaism when he declares that *“for out of the heart comes evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”* (15:19-20). Such teachings would become common in the early church as the apostles teach the followers of Jesus what behaviors are antithetical to being disciples of Christ:

- “Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolators, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers – none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.” – 1 Corinthians 6:9-10.
- “Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions,

factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.” – Galatians 5:19-20.

- “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).

Jesus challenges the Pharisees’ oral tradition without offering any challenge to the prescriptions of the biblical Torah; he encourages his disciples to understand that true defilement comes from not what goes into their mouth but what comes out, especially words and actions that can defile and cause harm to others and to the body of Christ into which they have been incorporated.

The next episode in Matthew’s Gospel does not at first seem to be related to this teaching on words and deeds that can defile; but it is not by accident that the Evangelist has placed these two episodes side-by-side. Jesus’ response to the challenge and threats posed by the Pharisees is when he *“left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon”* (15:21). These cities are across the border in Gentile territory, a region that had historically close ties with the ancient Canaanites (*“And the territory of the Canaanites extended from Sidon, in the direction of Gerar, as far as Gaza, and in the direction of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, and Zeboiim, as far as Lasha”* – Genesis 15:19). While he may have been hoping to remain anonymous so that he might rest, Jesus’ reputation as a healer has preceded him here, for a Canaanite woman whose daughter was *“tormented by a demon”* comes out and begins shouting *“Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David”* (15:22), addressing Jesus in the language of faith and worship. Jesus at first ignores her, and his disciples are likewise unsympathetic and urge him to *“send her away, for she keeps shouting after us”* 15:23). When he does speak it is to the disciples, not the desperate mother: *“I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”* (10:24), a statement that echoes Jesus’ earlier instructions 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). But the woman is undeterred by the response she receives from Jesus and his followers: *“But she came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’”* (15:25). Kneeling before Jesus in a position of trust and worship, *“accepting his lordship, she is confident that Jesus wields the divine power necessary to release the girl from demonic oppression”* (Mitch and Sri). In such a situation, we would expect that Jesus would be impressed by the woman’s faith and would have compassion on the daughter this mother so obviously loves. What we would **not** expect is how Jesus responds: *“It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs”* (15:26). The crudeness of Jesus’ analogy cannot be softened when he

compares the woman and all Gentiles to “dogs” (*kynarion*) which was a great insult at the time. While the people of Israel are the children of the Lord by covenant (“*you are children of the LORD your God*” – Deuteronomy 14:1), this still does not explain why Jesus dismisses the woman and her people as little more than dogs rather than family members who are unworthy of the bread that the Lord gives to his people. The woman sees Jesus as the Lord who is able to liberate her daughter from the bondage of demonic possession; by his words, Jesus does not even consider her to be a human being, much less a person worthy of God’s grace and healing.

While we may be stunned that Jesus would utter such harsh words, the Canaanite woman is undeterred by his comparing her and her people to dogs; while many would have given up after this second failed attempt at soliciting Jesus’ help, she presses forward, engaging the details of the parable: “*Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table*” (15:27). She claims a place in the household, not in a position of privilege or of an insider but of one who is present at the table and enjoys the crumbs that fall even as the “children” are fed.

- “Her statement is striking. She places hope in what others have discarded. This Son of David has so much power that there is enough power for the house of Israel and more than enough left over for her. She is not trying to thwart his mission. She just wants a crumb, recognizing that even a crumb is powerful enough to defeat the demon that has possessed her daughter.” – Carla Works.

Jesus is so impressed by the woman’s persistence that he declares “*woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish*” (15:28), with the end result that the woman’s daughter is healed instantly. For Luther, the end result of this encounter is that not only is her daughter healed but the woman is now seen by Jesus not as a dog but as a child of Israel worthy to sit at the table instead of catching the crumbs that fall below:

- “Is she not masterly? She catches Christ by means of his own words. He compares her to a dog, which she admits, and she asks no more than that he let her be like a dog as he himself judges. How could he respond? He was caught. No dog is denied breadcrumbs under the table. They ate its rightful share. Therefore he listens to her and submits to her will, so that she is no longer a dog but has become a child of Israel.” – Martin Luther, 1525.

While we may conclude that “all’s well that ends well” at the end of this encounter, we may still be deeply troubled by the way in which Jesus addresses this woman

who comes to him with great reverence and sincerity. His words may strike us as shocking, and we may ask ourselves, “How could he say such a thing?” And that is precisely the point: if we are shocked and offended by Jesus’ words, would we not also be horrified if we heard the same words come out of our mouths? Perhaps what Jesus is doing here is illustrating his early warning against hurtful words that can defile and cause damage far greater than anything that a person ingests. Dismissing a woman and her people as “dogs” can be seen as slander; when we look upon other persons as less than human, we are engaging in the same form of oral defilement that Jesus is exercising in his words to the Canaanite woman. As the Psalmist prayed, our prayer must also be that *“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). We must use our words as children of God for the intent of building up the body of Christ and sharing the love of God with others, knowing that *“love builds up and unites [while] hate tears down and destroys”* (Martin Luther King, Jr.). We must always use our words carefully so that all will know that we are children of God and God’s holy people who have been set apart *“to proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light”* (1 Peter 2:9).

- “May we conform our hearts to the heart of Christ by repenting of careless and cutting communication and by submitting to him and filling our hearts with his word. May our speech ‘always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that we may know how we ought to answer each person’ (Colossians 4:6). May we not let any ‘corrupting talk come out of our mouths, but only such as is good for building up, as fits the occasion, that it may give grace to those who hear’ (Ephesians 4:29). From Christ-like hearts may we speak words of love, light, and life.” – Campbell Markham.

While the words of George Carlin fit well in that memorable wedding at the Mets’ stadium, other words of the comedian would not have been appropriate there or in any situation. As God’s people, called to proclaim the good news of our Lord and Saviour, we must always take care that our words are never used to divide, dehumanize, or defile others. May our words be used for the purpose our Lord intends: to share light and life, to build up one another, and to share the liberating word, which is ours in the Word that became flesh, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.