

Pentecost 16B Proverbs 31: 10-31, Psalms 1, James 3:1-12, Mark 9:14-29

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Our words create – take care

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

There is a line in the movie Bambi where Thumper the rabbit repeats to Bambi and his other forest friends the wise words of his mother – if you can't say something nice don't say nothin' at all. It could be a shortened version of the reading from James we have just heard. James, in much more poetic but very powerful language, talks about the power of the tongue, of speech, and of how it can both bless and curse. He talks of the need to watch the tongue and to guard what we say.

The religious world at the moment has been set alight by the tongue of Pope Benedict. Last week during a lecture at a German university he quoted the words of a Byzantium Emperor who questioned whether any thing good had come out of Islam. The Emperor drew the attention of his listener, a Moslem caliph, to the violence that seemed to be inherent in the Islamic faith. After the Popes lecture some parts of the Islamic world erupted with violence. A nun was murdered. Churches were burned. Effigies of the pope were ignited.

The Popes tongue did indeed set off a fire both literally and figuratively. Now I do not want to get into a debate or sermon about whether it was a good idea for the Pope to make such comments, even if it was a quote from an historic source. I do think he knew exactly what he was doing and that it will hopefully get some much needed debate going about faith, reason, religion and violence in all its manifestations. What this situation has highlighted for me is the power of our words and how spot on James was and is.

In verse 2 James says one of the most comforting things in the bible – For all of us make many mistakes. In fact James says anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check. How often have we made terrible mistakes with our tongues! I look back on some of the things I said to my children and I cringe. And some of the things I have said to my dear husband I wish I could take back.

Our words are creative. With them, as James says, we both bless and curse. In Genesis it says that human beings are made in the image of God. The picture of God in the opening chapters of the bible is of a creative power who speaks and things come to be, the world, sun, moon and stars, all of it begin to exist. Like God, in God's image, our words have creative power. Our words can create goodness or they can create evil. One of

my spiritual directors, a very old Episcopalian priest from America, once said to me – if there is one thing I want you to understand it is how powerful you are. He was not advocating that I thought of myself as some all-powerful being. On the contrary he was trying to get me to see that I was not a victim, I was not helpless. What I said, what I did, what I thought, had a creative impact, for good or evil in my life. Our language is creative in what ever way it is expressed.

There is a strand in anthropology that concentrates solely on the centrality of language in the formation and maintenance of a culture. In that strand culture **is** language. The Bible, for good or for bad is not only part of western culture; it is a primary creative element within it. Our religious texts are powerful- the Koran, the Bhagavad-Gita, the Tao Te ching, the sutras, the Jewish Scriptures and the New Testament all play a central role in the way our societies have been formed and function.

Words are so powerful that whether they are written down or spoken out loud they must be used very carefully. In the Christian faith there is a long tradition of scripture being interpreted in the light of reason however all scripture is to be viewed through the eyes and mind of Christ. If you are wondering about those passages in the Old Testament the clue is what lens we use to view them. As Christians we are supposed to look at them through the eyes of Christ. They either show us what not to do, or they point us to the things we need to be embracing. With the lens of Jesus ritual violence, scape goating, the oppression of women, revenge and retribution are out. Love, peace, forgiveness and truth are in. The Bible is the most wonderful historical resource. With it we are reminded of the worst of which we are capable and the best.

Now if words are so powerful, if they can bless and curse, if they can create good or evil then what safe guards do we need to put in place?

The good woman of the proverbs reading is described in verse 30 as a person who fears the Lord. That is her most valuable quality. Her charm is deceitful, her beauty is vain, but the fact that she fears the Lord means she is to be praised. The fear of the Lord is not about cringing in fear, scared of what the almighty will do. It is about reverence and awe, wonder and giving God the glory. The central theme of the wisdom literature in the bible is that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. We might be made in the image of God but we are **not** God. When we fear the Lord, in awe and wonder, in an acceptance of our humanity and limitations we are in the right place to align ourselves with God's way. I suspect the best safeguard against an unruly tongue is the fear of the Lord, a heart that acknowledges that it is not the ego that is god but God the great I am.. James in our reading wonders how the disciples of Jesus could be people who could pour forth

both contention and conflict and also blessing. He says to them "my brothers and sisters this ought not be so". Further on he concludes that their hearts are not aligned with God. They are instead being influenced by evil.

Beginning the process of aligning our hearts with God is not as hard as we might think. It takes that strange, often misunderstood quality called faith. In the gospel story we heard about the young epileptic boy healed by Jesus. At the beginning of the story Jesus finds a group of people arguing amongst themselves. Their tongues are no doubt leading them into all sorts of strange alleyways and diversions. After Jesus asks for an explanation of why they were arguing he basically tells them off. Is it because they could not heal the boy or is it because they were caught up in a war of words that helped no one?

Jesus goes on to heal the boy but the deciding factor in the story is the interchange between the father of the boy and Jesus. The father begins to understand that what he needs to do is to believe. But he is in somewhat of a bind – he suspects Jesus can help but he is not wholly convinced. He wants to believe but for whatever reason he cannot quite cut it. He cries out – "I believe, help my unbelief". And that is enough. Jesus heals the boy. In all the miracle stories of the New Testament faith has a central part to play. Whether that is the faith of Jesus, or of the disciples or of the victims, faith is central but in the words of Jesus we don't need much – in fact as little as a mustard seed.

Faith like our words, no matter how great or small, is powerful and creative. The father in the story confessed to a *partial* faith, a faith that *wanted* to be more. He was trying, and that was the best he could do.

It was enough. Jesus spoke to the spirit disturbing the man's son, and the spirit departed. The little bit of faith the man had, his desperate hope, reached out and somehow made contact with the wonderful graciousness of God and the prayer of his heart was answered. You would all know of Michelangelo's famous painting of the hand of God extended to the hand of Adam, with their fingers almost touching? That's the way we really live, reaching out in our moments of greatest need and greatest transcendence, and God's hand is always there, ready to complete the connection.

And God is here, ready to bless you. You don't even have to believe it. You only have to want to believe it, and the God who loves you more than you have ever understood love in your life will complete the connection and give you peace and joy. I know it's hard to believe. But that's the point of our story.

On Thursday I attended the funeral of my Godmother, Elizabeth Catherine Wann. She was 97 when she died and had lived a full and rich life. She was a tiny, tiny woman. I remember when I turned 10 I began to tower

over her. Yet she had the most extraordinary faith and trust in God. She was perhaps the most significant person in my life after my immediate family. She created for me through her words and deeds a world where love and hope was possible. The priest at her funeral told the following story.

A famous English novelist nursed his wife as she died of cancer. He prayed and prayed to God but all he got was barred and bolted doors. He found nothing. Later he realized that it was not God who was barring the door. It was himself. Once the door was unbolted even tentatively, with just a small amount of hope, God was there and he found the peace and love of his creator. In the letter of James when we are connected with God then what we find and express is peace, gentleness, mercy and good fruits. As we share in communion together may we be at one with God, may God's peace live in our hearts and may our words and deeds glorify God and create blessings in our world. Lord we believe please help our unbelief. Amen