

The Reverend Kathy Boss
All Saints' Episcopal Church
Sermon
September 12, 2021
Proper 19, Track 2, Year B
"Words for Good and Evil"

Isaiah 50:4-9a
Psalm 116:1-8
James 3:1-12
Mark 8:27-38

"Sticks and Stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me!" Familiar? For me it was a bit of a mantra, a shield from bullies and careless people who spoke to hurt or without thought about other people. As psychology and neuroscience has come to show, it's a very flimsy shield. Words hurt, a lot. Words leave scars that can slice through an entire lifetime.

"And the tongue is a fire," James writes. "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." The tongue is laden with poison. And it's oh so-- too -- easy to use. To give a lashing. To demean and bully, to cast a shadow over someone's light, someone's hope, to pierce a tender heart without even knowing you've done it.

Yes. It is not hard to unleash the weapon of the tongue, to get your way, to hurt. I recently saw a video on Youtube where the videographer simply asked, "What is the most painful thing anyone has said to you." People remember. They remember from decades in the past. They still carry the pain of unbridled tongues.

And, of course, I encourage you to be aware of your speech--to ask yourself when you speak, "Is it kind, is it true, is it meaningful." To recognize the power of words to damage, to curse as well as bless.

But today, twenty years and a day after 9/11, I want to turn our ears and eyes to a particular pattern in speech, one that has repercussions far beyond personal lives--a pattern that can destroy whole peoples.

Speaking from the "moral high ground."

Speaking from a place where you are clearly on the right side of a situation (at least from everything you can see). Where you just want to do good, to be good. And...from a place of power.

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Names matter. “Who do you say that I am?” Not who am I, but how do you name me, asks Jesus. What is your word for me, because that matters.

The word Messiah comes with a whole set of connotations for the apostles. The Messiah is a powerful champion of good, one who will stand up for and fight for the righteous. Throughout the Old Testament this is about conquering the oppressor, about glory in rightness. The apostles feel the change coming! Jesus will sweep the world and they will follow in his wake.

And then, Jesus, drops the bomb. “...the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed.” Be killed, wait, what!? That’s not what a messiah does. A messiah uses his righteousness, his shining goodness to rule, to conquer, to *overpower* evil with good. Be killed? Rise? It doesn’t make any sense.

Peter, dear Peter, always at Jesus side, and yet another who--in that inescapable aspect of humanity pointed out by James--“makes many mistakes.” Peter speaks from the moral high ground, from a desire to save the one he loves, to save, The One. From an understanding of the power Jesus could wield.

And, Wow, Jesus’ reaction is stunning. “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.” Get behind me, Satan! Talk about hurtful words.

Perplex'd and troubl'd at his bad success
The Tempter stood, nor had what to reply,
Discover'd in his fraud, thrown from his hope,
So oft, and the perswasive Rhetoric
That sleek't his tongue¹

¹ Paradise Regain'd: Book 4 (1671 version) BY JOHN MILTON

Wrote John Milton in *Paradise Regain'd* of Satan's encounter with Jesus in the wilderness. Persuasion, words, did not sway Jesus. Peter's persuasions, Peter's good intentions are just as dangerous as the temptations in the desert.

Don't tell anyone else I am the Messiah, Jesus says. Was this because he feared others would be tempted to use their leader's status as Messiah to "lord" it over others. To claim a moral high ground, and use power to impose their will, losing sight of love, compassion and need.

We see in the Gospel today a stark illustration of the danger of thinking you know the right path. Thinking that doing good requires others to get on the same path, whatever the cost. Rather than choose to be an authority based in power, and control, or on retribution. Jesus was, is and will be an authority in love.

In the days after the planes hit the Towers, and then the Pentagon, and also crashed into a field in Pennsylvania, we were in a state of shock. The world joined our mourning, rallying behind us after this brutal act of violence.

But then...words. "We're the good guys." "The brightest light." "The best, the most elite." We had the moral high ground. We had the right to be indignant. And, we had power. Then the corollary words-- "Evil." "Axis of Evil." "Foreigners" and worse. A simplified version of an intensely complicated human situation--We "make many mistakes."--that led us down a path that, after some brief days of solidarity after the planes hit, has bifurcated more than ever before.

"Get behind me Satan."

Good against Evil, Order against Chaos, Lawful against Criminal. We have used these demarcations for heinous acts--acts begun by the flaming tongues of people who believed they were right, they were good, or, at the very least, convinced whole populations that they were on the side of life, on the side of good. The crusades, Manifest Destiny, war after war after war.

After 9/11 leaders in the US used their moral authority, used the positioning of the enemy as evil, to justify horrible, brutal, dehumanizing torture against children of God. We "the good", were human, they "the evil" were inhuman.

This is the danger of words from a "moral high ground" backed by hegemony and power. We feel so right, and may even be so, that we feel justified doing what

we otherwise wouldn't in order to protect what we feel is right. We belittle others, we dehumanize others, we "curse those who are made in the likeness of God."

How then do we focus on Divine things, on the beloved humanity of all people, rather than on human things, on our need to claim that moral high ground and enforce it with might and power.

This path is not one of easy answers. Words spoken meanly on the playground, in office break rooms, family gatherings can singe us no matter what that little rhyme about Sticks and Stones said.

Words spoken from simple binaries of Good and Evil, Right and Wrong, Life and Death, can devastate entire populations--those targeted with retribution, and those doing the targeting. And it only works because we all play our part in it, all get caught up in it. Words matter. Be cautious of the impulse to dehumanize, to demean from a position of moral authority. Do not curse God's children. "Walk in the presence of the Lord." With humility, with kindness, truth, and seeking.