

Words Matter

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

In the business world, this is called a “soft opening.” We resumed in person worship in June, with some limitations and following protocols. We were so looking forward to this day, September 12, as a day to be “back,” with vaccine rates high and infection rates low and masks a distant memory. If anything, though, COVID has taught us to expect the unexpected and unwanted. Delta variants, disturbingly low – in some places – vaccine rates, disturbingly troubling – at least to me – debates about masks, concerns about children especially and people we know and love still getting sick and hospitalized and dying in heartbreaking numbers. That is where we are. So a “soft opening.”

Even so – welcome. Welcome back from whatever your summer was, or whatever your pandemic sabbatical was. Welcome back to the choir – we’ve missed you and are so grateful for your music-making! We will continue to worship, with masks, for now, with some other adjustments based on what we’ve learned. We will have a fabulous picnic outdoors – please join us, with special thanks to all who have contributed items or time to make it fun and festive.

We missed last year the opportunity to recognize our new members and our 50-year members. I would ask all of those who are either new members or 50-year members – you are listed in the bulletin – to stand now that we may recognize you... I hereby declare that you may get in front of the line at the picnic. In a deeper sense, you have our gratitude for your commitment and many decades of faithfulness dedicated to this community of faith and its ministry. Thank you, and God bless you.

Finally, a word about the installation service next Saturday. An installation service is about the church, not the minister so much. I do hope you can make it. Yes, it’s on a Saturday afternoon, but that is so 1 – members of the presbytery who are at their own churches on Sunday mornings can join us, a very important thing, and 2

– we won't compete with the Eagles game. Josh Walters, a friend of mine and an Episcopal priest in McLean, Virginia will be our guest preacher, and the installation commission will represent the diverse membership of our presbytery, some long-time friends and several of our mission partners. We will have a lovely reception afterward. What better way to spend a Saturday afternoon, right? You can also live-stream the service, or watch it later if need be. Join us, as you are able, for a good moment in the life of this congregation. And whether present or not, keep this ministry in your prayers.

What are your memories of 20 years and a day ago, September 11, 2001? Mine remain crystal clear. I had been invited to participate in a colloquium at our Presbyterian seminary in Richmond, Virginia, a group of ministers and seminary professors. Our topic was equally esoteric and intriguing – the Bible as the word of God in the history of our tradition. We had read a lot and were scheduled for a series of lectures and discussions. Sometime around 9:30 or 10:00 on that Tuesday morning, someone rolled a TV on a cart into our meeting room. We weren't sure exactly what we were watching. Then reality slowly dawned on us.

I could not fully comprehend the news but I knew one thing – I had to get home, home to my beloved spouse and our third-grader and kindergartner. I didn't know if they were in harm's way – who really knew? – but I knew I had to be with them and we had to be together. This was pre-smart phone, and we were all scrambling. No flights, of course. No rental cars in Richmond. A very kind Presbyterian elder from Charlottesville drove me from Richmond to Charlottesville, where I stayed in a Motel 6 overnight – sleeping only a few hours, really – and then driving very, very, very fast, along with hundreds of other drivers, the 500 or so miles. Every time I looked out the window at a fellow driver, I was met with the same gaze, a combination of fear and rage and compassion and determination and confusion and hope.

That week at the church, we held prayer services every night. I am sure you remember what you all did here, being so close, in a way, to all three sites.

That next Sunday, September 16, I really didn't know what to preach about. The church was full. I read Psalm 46, as we have done with the children this morning.

Then I prayed for about 10 minutes and we sang “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past, Our Hope for Years to Come.” Our hope for years to come. I still believe that.

Do you remember those days following? A kind of sense of national unity, even if somewhat incomplete. The sense that this national tragedy would draw us closer together as a people, unify us, unite our resolve. President Bush threw out the first pitch of a World Series game and I, even I, was a Yankee fan for about 30 seconds. Do you remember?

Now, one score later, two decades, 20 years. Where is that unity? Where is the common ground, the shared resolve? We feel more divided than ever – economically, politically, racially, ideologically, theologically – from the sources of our news to our thoughts on masks and vaccines to our understandings of whose lives matter, or not. COVID has seemed only to accelerate and magnify our brokenness.

Social media does not help, by any means. One can tweet, or re-tweet, immediately, anonymously, with impunity – my mother’s admonition that “if you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all” just a dim and quaint suggestion. But like indoor plumbing and electricity and the Phillies bullpen, social media will always be with us, and can, like anything, be a useful tool.

It’s more than that. It’s a meanness. A distrust. A presumption that difference divides, demonizing and vilifying those who don’t agree with us. One score. Two decades. 20 years. We said then – never forget. What did that mean; what does it mean? The victims, to be sure. But more than that. We said then, love your neighbor. We still do. What did that mean; what does it mean? What does it look like?

I may have always known this, but one thing I learned, or had reinforced, was the opposite of what my mom taught me, about saying something nice. I also have learned that the opposite of the old playground adage is true – that while sticks and stones can break bones, that words can hurt, too. They can heal, yes. But they can hurt. Hurt seriously. They can build up the body politic, or our life together as a community of faith, or they can tear at our common fabric.

The letter to James understands that. Says James: “the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.” The tongue, James says, though small, can guide a

horse like a bridle, can steer a boat like a rudder, can, like a small fire, burn down a whole forest. David Keck writes that these verses “do not offer much hope. James is in deep anguish over how the things we say can be so destructive.” The tongue, James says, is a fire, a “restless evil, full of deadly poison.” Evil, full of deadly poison.

A week ago, tennis star Sloane Stephens lost to Angelique Kerber in the third round of the U.S. Open. “After last night’s match,” she reported, “I got 2K + messages of abuse/anger from people upset by yesterday’s result.” She shared screenshots of messages filled with racial slurs and physical threats and obscenities, and worse. Evil, full of deadly poison.

Times columnist Frank Bruni tells this story: “There I was, absent-mindedly pumping fuel into my rental car, when I heard a man shouting. A few seconds passed before I realized that his words were directed at me.

‘Take off your mask!’ he yelled, with an expletive mixed in. I looked away, but he kept at it. He called me an ‘idiot.’ A ‘moron.’ My refusal to acknowledge him only incensed him further. His voice somehow grew louder, his tone even more menacing.”

I am not suggesting that any of us sends those kinds of racist messages to a gifted Black tennis player, or hurls those kinds of invectives at an anonymous guy filling his gas tank. I am disparaging that we live in a world where that happens, and more commonly and frequently by the minute, and that we’ve come to a kind of collective acceptance. I am resonating with what seems like a simple acknowledgement, yet a profound Christian ethic, that the tongue is a fire that can do real damage in and of itself and that can lead to other damage. The profound ethic, which sounds so simple, is that words matter, now, to be sure, words that can hurt or words that can heal.

Doug Bratt writes that controlling our tongues is “more like trying to control a great white shark than a hamster.” It’s not just on a global or political or national level, like the examples I’ve mentioned. Says Bratt: “...think of how our tongues can also cut people down. How an irritated word, for instance, can ruin a friendship. Or how a critical word can break down vulnerable people. Or how a word of gossip can destroy a reputation.”

I must confess with the old spiritual that “sometimes I fell discouraged, and feel my life’s in vain...” But I also confess belief, as I said, in God who is our hope for years to come. Where is that hope? Where do we find it?

Because there is good news. With all this evil, deadly poison stuff that seems so real and so powerful, James does not leave us hanging. We have choices to make, James says. From the same mouth can come blessings *or* curses. We can choose blessing. Our words can be like fresh water *or* bitter water. We can choose.

On a granular level, relationally, we can choose. Bratt writes: “...consider how the encouraging use of our tongues can build a friendship. Or how a word of forgiveness can re-direct whole lives through reconciliation with people who have hurt us. Or how the gentle use of our tongues might bolster sagging and broken spirits.” We know what that looks like. We can do that. We can both give and receive encouraging words, gentle words, forgiving words, reconciling words.

Truthful words, yes, even difficult words. This is not about being so nice that our words have no substance. And it’s not about declining to say anything either to avoid or to be misunderstood. Even difficult words can be offered in love, and in love, misunderstood words will always seek understanding. So trust the Spirit to work through you to say what needs to be said in the way that it needs saying. That’s not just practice, but a Christian ethic.

And that ethic becomes even more important when applied more broadly, to our life in the church or to our civic life. It’s important to apply when we respond to the questions of what we have learned in the last 20 years, or the last two years – post-September 11 and post – kind of – pandemic. It’s important to apply as we engage the very real challenges we face as a people. We know the litany, racism and sexism and poverty. These are important matters not only of civic life, but of the life of faith, and we must trust how the Spirit is guiding our tongues as we say the words that we are called to say.

We need to speak hopefully and humbly about how our faith will matter in the world. We need to speak up and out when words are hurtful and demeaning and divisive. Speak the truth. Speak what we believe. Speak it all in love. This is about more than civility, though that would be nice. It is about countering the hateful words with healing ones, about claiming your call, our call, as a mouthpiece for blessing, a voice for hope.

Isaiah tells us that God gives us a word. We trust that God, so we can trust that word. And we can trust the Spirit who empowers us to speak, to speak the words that will matter. Because they do. Happy homecoming. Amen.