

The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany – January 28, 2018
Mark 1:21-28

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Everyone knows this saying: “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me”. I remember saying those words when I was young, trying hard to convince myself of its truth in the face of painful words thrown my way. Unfortunately, as we all know from personal experience, it is far from true. Verbal insults, verbal abuse, and the power of words to affect our emotions and actions are well demonstrated in science. For example, scientists have found that just hearing sentences about elderly people led research subjects to walk more slowly. In other research, individuals who read words of ‘loving kindness’ showed increases in self-compassion, improved mood, and reduced anxiety.

Words are not simply sounds caused by air passing through our larynx. Words have real power: God spoke the universe into being through His words; Jesus healed and cast out demons with his words; rulers have risen and fallen by their words; Christians have always worshiped through words of song and prayer. Rabbi Yehuda Berg writes, “Words are singularly the most powerful force available to humanity. We can choose to use this force constructively with words of encouragement, or destructively using words of despair. Words have energy and power with the ability to help, to heal, to hinder, to hurt, to harm, to humiliate and to humble.”

Words, when spoken with authority, are powerful. In our holy scriptures, prophets are powerful purveyors of words – words that contain generative power – words that provoke reaction – words that have the power to cause people to repent and return to God, as well as to cause violent reaction. Throughout our holy scriptures, God calls various people to be his prophets, to be speakers of God’s truth. The power of these prophets’ words come not from the words themselves, but from the authority invested in the one who proclaims them. These are God’s words – God’s truth – entrusted to the prophet to speak. They speak not of and for themselves but for the God and Creator of all.

Our Gospel lesson this morning from Mark describes the first revelation of the authority invested in Jesus by God. Jesus has just called his first disciples and they have traveled to Capernaum. Jesus goes to the synagogue because it is the Sabbath, and begins to teach. Mark says that the congregation was “astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority.” They somehow recognized that Jesus taught with a special authority not possessed by the other synagogue leaders. This great authority was then powerfully displayed when, using merely his words of rebuke, Jesus heals the convulsing man of the unclean spirit.

Words spoken with authority are, indeed, powerful. But there is a difference between power and authority and often we confuse the two. Lutheran Pastor Peter Marty writes about coming to realize that in his younger years he had confused the “authority of power with the power of authority.” And that this distinction makes all the difference. One can have power due to the office one fills but possess little invested authority by the people – Nixon after Watergate being a good example. The inverse may also be true that one may have tremendous authority invested and rarely ever need to exercise the full powers of the office. The authority of power

may be understood as the power over while the power of authority as power from. One may take power but one must be granted and invested with authority.

Jesus heals the possessed man of the unclean spirit not by forcing it out rather by calling it out. The important distinction here is that the spirit recognized the authority invested in Jesus, saying: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.” Likewise, the congregation in the synagogue, witnessed Jesus’ power to exorcize yet were amazed instead by the act and assertion of his authority, exclaiming, “What is this? A new teaching – with authority!” What they saw in Jesus was more than raw power; what they witnessed revealed in Jesus was the full authority of God. Through the person of Jesus flowed the fullness of God’s grace and power.

Thankfully, most of us are not called to be prophets like Moses, nor do our words carry the full authority of God like Jesus. But, as we are made in the image of God, our words, too, may be generative. They may have the power to heal or harm, inspire or discourage, express love or incite fear. The words we use in our worship and in our celebration of the sacraments are powerful. Not because of the one saying them but because of the goodness of God’s grace.

In a little while, I will stand behind the altar and recite the words of the Eucharistic Prayer. While the words themselves are worthy, God does not transform the gifts of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ because I said this word rather than another, but because that is our prayer and it is God’s desire to do so. No amount of precise hand gestures and melodic recitation of certain words can compel God to do anything. That would not be faith or religion. That would be magic. Rather, the sacraments of the church are symbols of God’s works of grace. And the power found in them comes not from the priest saying them but from the source of their authority – God.

Our catechism defines a sacrament as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace.” In other words, our ritualized actions are signs of the work that God is already enacting in our lives. With our sacramental acts, we do not conjure and direct God’s grace, rather we reveal the grace of God already present and active. The Rt. Rev. Jeffrey Lee, Bishop of the Diocese of Chicago, once preached about the sacraments of the church, saying: “Our sacraments don’t make true. Our sacraments make real.”

Our sacraments don’t make true. Our sacraments make real. That a priest poured water upon my daughter’s head in her baptism doesn’t make true that she is cleansed of sin and made a member of the Body of Christ. That was already true. The sacrament of Baptism made real within her, us, and the church, the truth that God’s grace was present within her. In the same way, the sanctifying work of the sacrament of Holy Eucharist, isn’t made true within us simply because a properly ordained priest recited certain words and enacted certain gestures. That was already true. The sacrament of Holy Eucharist makes real within us the sanctifying work of God’s grace already at work within us.

Having said that, I also recognize that the sacramental words we speak and gestures we make are important and meaningful. They are so because they are a sign – a sign of our intentions, our petitions, our prayers, our hope. And we need these signs, because they remind us of who we are and who God is. They remind us from where we have come and where we wish to go. They express our best understanding of what is already true and that which we wish to experience as true. These words reframe our experience of reality and reorient us from the inward focus on our own needs and fears to an outward focus on God and our neighbor. These words literally help us to love and guide us on the path that leads to eternal and resurrected life.

I read somewhere that a word is like a living organism, capable of growing, changing, spreading, and influencing the world in many ways, directly and indirectly through others. I had never thought about a word being 'alive' before, but then I think of words spoken over the millennia, passed through many generations, and they seem quite alive when read or spoken today. As I reflect on the power of the word to incite and divide, to calm and connect, or to create and effect change, I again strive to be more careful and compassionate in the words I speak and how I listen to the words around me.

I pray that the words I speak glorify God, me, and others. I pray that the words I speak affect healing and new life, rather than suffering and destruction. And I pray that the words we all speak become a sacrament in the world, revealing and making real the truth of God's grace in our midst, healing, resurrecting, and reconciling all things to God.

Amen.