

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord – Sunday, January 10, 2021
Mark 1:4-11

Holy Spirit of God, may the refining fire of Your love reach into our hidden, inmost places and make us one spirit with You. Amen.

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” We all know this children’s expression. It first appeared in print in the mid-1800’s, but even then it was referred to as an “old adage.” This expression has been around a really long time, which is remarkable to me, given just how far from the truth it is.

When I was a child, I sure wanted it to be true and I tried to glean confidence from its recitation when I was the target of insulting and hurtful words. But anyone who has been around the block a few times knows that words can have generative power. We know how much verbal insults and verbal abuse can cut deeply and leave lasting scars. And the power of words to affect our emotions and actions is well demonstrated in science. For example, scientists have found that just hearing sentences about elderly people led research subjects to walk more slowly. They have also found that individuals who read words of ‘loving kindness’ showed increases in self-compassion, improved mood, and reduced anxiety.

Words are not merely sounds caused by air passing through our larynx. They 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 the words of song and prayer. Rabbi Yehuda Berg writes this: “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.”

This week, we were witnesses to just this generative power. Sadly, what we observed was the manifestation of destructive energy. Words activated the transformation of what might have been a lawful and peaceful protest into a riotous and dangerous mob. They besieged the Capitol compound in D.C. and forced entry into the US Capitol building. They violently interrupted the constitutional business of the people; threatened the safety of our elected representatives and their staff; verbally and physically assaulted journalists; injured and mortally wounded law enforcement officers and themselves, and looted, defaced, and destroyed property, all while shouting angry and incendiary words, calling for the execution of our Vice President, erecting a wooden gallows, and waving banners bearing the symbols of their allegiance.

As Barry C. Black, the senate chaplain, said early Thursday morning from the house floor as the joint session of Congress concluded in prayer, “These tragedies have reminded us that words matter, and that the power of life and death is in the tongue.” If words have the power to divide and destroy, words also have the power to unite and create new life. What makes the difference is community, the state of our hearts, and which symbols we hold aloft bear into the world.

As followers of Jesus, first and foremost we bear the mark of Christ. In our baptismal liturgy, the newly baptized receive the mark of the cross in chrism on their foreheads and are told that they have been “sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever.” This mark is sacramental in that it is an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible transformation by the Holy Spirit. While the oil of chrism will wash off, the mark of Christ is made indelible and permanent upon our souls.

Each Ash Wednesday, we are reminded of our Christ mark when we receive the imposition of ashes on our foreheads. This action, with which we remember and proclaim our mortality and fragility, makes visible and brings into relief our original baptismal mark. The power of Ash

Wednesday is not only the reminder of our creaturely mortality but also our membership in the communion of Christ. Deeper than any allegiance to country, political party, or affinity group, we bear the mark of Christ. This is an awesome privilege that brings with it a remarkable responsibility – one that we cannot possibly honor fully without God’s help.

Today, we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord. In our service this morning, we are reminded of the power of words as we recommit our unity and communion in the Body of Christ. We remember that through our baptism, we join Christ in his baptism, are anointed by the Holy Spirit, and made one body and one spirit in Christ and the church.

In a few minutes, we will renew our baptismal vows as presented in our Baptismal Covenant. We will affirm the orthodox faith of the Church as stated in the ancient words of the Apostles’ Creed. And we also make five aspirational and increasingly challenging promises: to continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers; to persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever we fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord; to proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ; to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves; and, finally, to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being. These promises, if taken seriously, should make all of us very nervous. Thankfully, the Church knows these are impossible promises for us to keep on our own, so our promissory response is not “yes, I will” but rather “I will, with God’s help.” With this acclamation, we proclaim our desire and intention to seek God’s help in fulfilling these promises.

While the words of our Baptismal Covenant have been carefully chosen and composed, this generative power does not reside merely in the recitation of the words, rather the real source of the power comes from the intention of the hearts of those invoking the words. In baptism, the candidates are not baptized into the Body of Christ simply because we said specific words, but because that is our prayer and it is God’s desire to do so. Likewise, the sacraments of the church are symbols of God’s works of grace, and our ritualized actions are signs of the work that God is already enacting in our lives.

The Rt. Rev. Jeffrey Lee, former Bishop of the Diocese of Chicago once preached that, “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 already at work 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 by preparing our hearts to receive this reality.

Having said that, I also say 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. In doing so, they align our intentions and our hearts in such a way as to make real the truth of God’s outpouring of grace. These words literally help us to love and guide us on the path that leads to eternal and resurrected life.

I’ve 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 find fascinating

and compelling this idea that a word is alive. When I think of the words of holy scripture spoken over the millennia, passed through many generations, 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 recommit myself 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.