

Words Matter/Matter of Words

James 3:1-12, Genesis 1: 1-13

January 14, 2018

A story is told of a remorseful Jewish gentleman who approaches his rabbi before Yom Kippur. "Rabbi, I spoke poorly about my neighbor. I know it is a great sin to spread gossip, and I desperately want to repent before Yom Kippur. What can I do?" The rabbi responded, "Take this bag of feathers and place one on each doorstep in the village."

The contrite Jew eagerly carried out his rabbi's instructions. He returned in a few hours and proudly informed the rabbi of his actions. The rabbi replied, "In order to complete your process of repentance, you must return to each of those homes and collect the feathers." Once again, this Jewish man rushed to fulfill the rabbi's order. Days later he returned with

a long face and a heavy heart. "Rabbi, I tried my best to collect those feathers, but the winds came and blew them all over the city. I could not collect them all." The rabbi nodded and said, "Yes, my friend, that is the nature of our words. Once we have spoken them, we can not take them back."

On Monday this week I was meeting with a pastor/preacher friend and he asked me what I was preaching this week. I told him I was contemplating a three-point sermon, a New Years reflection/resolution of sorts—Choose Kindness/Speak Truth/Listen to the Middle. He rightly commented that sounded like a sermon series. Continuing to talk, I agreed with him, and decided to focus this morning simply on “words” before the words we’ve been hearing about this week.

Words. Jews and Christians trace the creative power of words back to the opening words of Genesis: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”. How? Through speech.

Eight exclamations: God said, “Light!” And there was light. God said “Sky!” And sky separated from waters. “Separate!” And dry land separated from the seas. Then “Grow” “Shine!” “Swarm!” “Animals!” “And finally “Humans”. That’s some power! But our spiritual history with words doesn’t end there.

Not only do God’s words have the power of create... Satan’s first act is also to speak. Back in Genesis, 3rd chapter, remember the talking serpent? The wily serpent, representing Satan, sows seeds of doubt, saying to the Woman: “Do I understand that God told you not to eat from any tree in the garden?” Then the Serpent outright accuses the Creator of lying: “You’ll be just like God, you’ll know everything”. Unfortunately, Adam and Eve bought the lie and entered a distorted universe.

We just celebrated the incarnation, Christmas, the coming of the One John calls, “Word of God”. God spoke God-self into this world as Jesus where he communicated God: God’s patient, unconditional,

universal love for creation and its creatures.

And there's more: The monk Martin Luther insisted that the words of scripture be understandable to the laity and gave his congregations the Bible in German, which started a translation movement which continues. The value and accessibility of words became etched even more broadly into the character of Protestantism

And Presbyterians for 300 years still have emphasized the importance of words, language, proclamation in the training and ministries of its pastors. Hebrew and Greek language proficiency are a requirement.

Words- their choice, their timing, their accuracy, matter

James had observed this in his time: "A word out of your mouth can seem of no account, but it can accomplish nearly anything – or destroy it.

It only takes a spark to set off a forest fire.

The 20th Century Rabbi and scholar Abraham Heschel wrote that

words are themselves sacred—both God’s tool for creating the universe and our tools for bringing holiness—or evil—into the world. His daughter Susannah wrote that he used to tell her that the Holocaust did not begin with the building of crematoria, and Hitler did not come to power with tanks and guns; it all began with uttering evil words, with defamation, with language and propaganda. *Words create worlds*, he would tell her as a child and they must be used very carefully. Some words, once having been uttered, gain eternity and can never be withdrawn.

An intrepid kid, Susannah quickly shot back at her father, “When I build, I build with my blocks. When those men built our house, they used bricks and cement. Why did God create the world with words?” Rabbi Heschel stroked his long white beard, smiled, and responded, “That’s simple: It was to teach us an important lesson: Just as God created our world with words, **our words create worlds, too**. So we must use our

words very carefully, because kind words create a kind world, but mean words create a mean world.”

Destructive words create devastating worlds. Encouraging words create life-giving, life-nurturing worlds.

A group of frogs were traveling through the woods, and two of them fell into a deep pit. All the other frogs gathered around the pit. When they saw how deep the pit was, they told the two frogs that they were as good as dead.

The two frogs ignored the comments and tried to jump up out of the pit with all of their might. The other frogs kept telling them to stop, that they were as good as dead. Finally, one of the frogs took heed to what the other frogs were saying and gave up. He fell down and died.

The other frog continued to jump as hard as he could. Once again, the crowd of frogs yelled at him to stop the pain and just die. He jumped even harder and finally made it out.

When he got out, the other frogs said, "Did you not hear us?" The frog explained to them that he was practically deaf. He thought they were encouraging him the entire time.

Words create worlds--

Martin Luther King was a master of creating a world with his words. With precisely honed, Biblically saturated rhetoric he gave us the vision of a world where ‘little girls and little boys would not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.’” He took us to the mountain top, like Joshua, and helped us look over into that land, not yet within our reach, of the Peaceable Kingdom. And that vision drew a country into civil rights movement and the ongoing movement of equality and fairness and cooperation and inclusion written into our Constitution--—not only in legislation, but in spirit of the nation

With his words, he called for a new consciousness, (“world”?) declaring that humanity had inherited a great “world house” in which we have to live together—black and white, Easterners and Westerners, Gentiles and Jews, Catholics and Protestants, Moslem and Hindu, a family unduly separated in ideas, culture, and interests who, because we can never again live without each other, must learn, somehow, in this one big world, to live with each other.”

There’s nothing easy about bringing that world into being. But isn’t it the world Jesus talked about too?

Is George Orwell’s 1984 still being read in high school? Remember “doublespeak” and ‘newspeak’. Orwell wrote that the English Language becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. In reports that pass for “news” or “political or cultural analysis” regardless of the leanings of the source, we are besought with

hyperbole, accusations, smear campaigns, distortions, euphemisms, overgeneralizations, and evasions. There is a resulting numbness and laziness to think for ourselves.

Words create worlds. Those worlds are further reflected in words we choose.

We're in a critical, perhaps pivotal time in our country because increasingly, people with power, are unapologetically, misusing and abusing words, employing words to demean, offend, and humiliate. Our world now includes "fake news", "alternative facts", "remembering differently". "Spin" is nothing new. But the severe polarization and desire to cover-up unsavory acts with more words is damaging our unity and distorts our humanity. Those damaging words and the responses to them go viral. And they make us sick. Morally sick. And to make matters worse most of the words from talk radio and television are more driv-

than crafted, more like processed cheese than well aged cheddar. More artificially colored, flavored than pure, natural, or nourishing.

But we go on listening, don't we? Humans are drawn to lies and deceit, and drama. Some of us listen, tolerate, ignore or excuse—and become passive co-creators of a “world”. Some of us feed on the anger that rises in our own hearts and allow our brain's chemical responses to control us rather than using our God-given ability to reason and reflect. And we co-create a world.

When you next listen to MSNBC or FOX and Friends or CNN or BBC, or listen to NPR or Rush, ask yourself: What world is being created by these commentaries? When you next listen to a political speech, check you Facebook newsfeed or forward a tweet, ask the same question.

In 2009, a brilliant writer, poet, theologian English professor Marilyn Chandler McEntyre wrote “Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies.” Great title for reading in 2018. In it she avers that words are entrusted to us as

tools and equipment and that caring for language is a moral issue. She calls for “Stewardship of Words”. That was new to this Logophile.

Now stewardship of words is not the same as censorship.. Our government is the keeper and enforcer of our Laws, our Constitutional Rights, our First Amendment rights. To be stewards of words is to recognize that just because I am free to speak my opinion without fear of punishment doesn't mean it is helpful or necessary. To be a steward of words is a higher calling.

I wonder if the church isn't one of the few places, communities, who can be Word Stewards. We are those who profess Christ, the Word made Flesh. Can we invigorate them for use as bearers of truth and instruments of love. (Caring for Words , McEntyre, p. 1)

Words create worlds.

Last night I received a statement from our General Presbyter, released by National Council of Churches. These excerpts are fitting close to this sermon.

“President Trump’s obscene remarks, reported yesterday ... were deeply disturbing. The National Council of Churches unequivocally condemns these statements.

Further, President Trump’s stated preference for immigrants from nations such as Norway, combined with numerous other comments he has made over past years, reveals a deep-seated racism that is unacceptable. These attitudes must be publicly rejected by all people of faith. The very soul of our nation is at stake.

As Dr. King said, “A time comes when silence is betrayal.” We cannot remain silent at a time like this in the life of our nation.

We therefore demand that President Trump renounce his reprehensible views and apologize to the people he has demeaned through this likewise reprehensible language. We further demand that the President seek to restore the dignity of the Oval Office by living out through concrete actions our country's universal invitation to "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free."

In this spirit, we not only stand in solidarity with the noble people of Haiti, El Salvador, and Africa, we welcome those who immigrate to the United States from all countries of the world.

As followers of Jesus the Christ, himself a resident of and refugee from a poor and marginalized country, we ask everyone to join us, to act now, to unite, and to end racism.

That's being Steward of Words.

This is how words make worlds.

