



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

'The Ethics of Speech' - The Sixteenth Sunday After Pentecost- 9-12-2021

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen.

In the year 2000, we were living in Hamden, Connecticut, which is a suburb of New Haven. I was trying to get to work on a dissertation and I had much, more than many men of the childbearing responsibilities for Phoebe. And so I'd bring her to her daycare and I'd pick her up and we would start to work on dinner. It was this wonderful time. I also worked at a local church that was right in the middle of New Haven. And on one commute home, I came to this turn. It was a left turn across two lanes, and it had one of those directionals where the green light would kind of flash and you were supposed to go if you could.

There was a car in front of me and whoever was driving that car was just having a moment of hesitation, you know, where the car is just kind of going back and forth and you're like, oh, well, are we going? We're stopped. Are we going? And then behind me, there was a guy who became a little exercised. And so he began to just blow on the horn at every time the green light flashed, he would go wa, wa, wa, wa. I got a little frustrated and so I began to utter a word that begins with F and ends with K. It's four letters. It's a derivation is Saxon. It's a bit course. So I began to say every time the light hit and the horn blasted, I kept on saying F you, F you, F you, F you. And it was cleansing. I just felt this incredible, like, ah.

Then I finally took the left turn and I was going along and then I felt like this ice descending on me from the back of the car. And I looked in the rear view mirror and Phoebe who was in her car seat was just like, looking at me with this look. I said, "What?" "You said a word." I said, "I did? I guess - yes, I said a word. I said a word." "You shouldn't say those words. Number one, you're a priest. Number two, no one should speak to people like that."

I decided at that moment to engage in what a philosopher would call special pleading. I said, "Mommies and daddies when they drive, can you use bad language occasionally. It's allowed." And she said, "No, it is not." She knew enough, not true. And when we got to our little house, I think she would have just gone in and just kind of closed the door and be done with me, but I had to help her get out of her car seat. So she kind of waited sullenly and she went in. And that was that, 2000. It was the first time I remember disappointing my

children, and no one likes to do that. It was also a moment in which I was thinking about language a lot and speech, the things we say, the things we leave unsaid.

A lot of water has passed under the bridge since the year 2000. We have awakened ourselves to the fact that we are fragile and vulnerable to attack. We have been involved in war of one kind or another for 20 years. We have become manipulated by social media, which has created echo chambers in which our own thoughts can reinforce themselves and bring out the worst in us.

And finally, in this pandemic, we have been isolated and the comfort you have of screaming through a window or a windscreen is now replaced by the screen of your monitor or phone in which so often we engage in coarse language. So often we engage in speech that is disrespectful. So often we engage in a kind of language that erodes and breaks trust. And my child at three years old knew that that wasn't right. And we all know that it's not right. And yet it continues to get worse.

Now I bring this all up because I don't want to shame anybody. And by bringing up my own experience, I wanted to simply own my own part in this problem, because I think when we talk about the ethics of speech or the ethics of language, we tend to make the problem so large that no one can pick it up and therefore no one is truly responsible. And in the same breath, we also tend to make it somebody else's problem that someone else is responsible for. It's those people who constantly want us to be politically correct, we say, or it's that post-truth politics where you can say whatever you want so long as you can advance your agenda through inflammation or through any kind of fear-mongering.

We tend to make the breakdown in language, somebody else's problem. And this breakdown in language over the past generation is its own problem. By that I mean, you can find examples in many places of living in a time that is troubled. Jesus Himself in today's gospel says that He is living in a sinful generation, but the problem with language has shifted and it is real. And it's important for us to take notice.

In your bulletin cover today, I have one way of ways in which people have tried to identify the problem of language. In 1966, Robert Smithson, who was better known as a land artist and made this beautiful spiraling kind of jetty. He drew this quick sketch called a heap of language. And it's there that he listed all the ways we try to express ourselves. And the problem for Smithson is that language has to be a kind of bridge between non-existence and existence. Do I exist? Do the words I use matter on an eternal plane? For Smithson, the concern, the fear is all the language we use is just a kind of mound of babble that heaps up upon itself.

In our generation, we have a different problem with language, you see. The problem isn't whether or not language can bridge the difference between non-existence and existence. The problem is that we tend to use language to dehumanize another. And the language we fail to use can be seen as a disrespect, as a kind of dismissal as a kind of diminishment of another person's experience. So the problem of language we have now is it's the marker of who counts and who does not count, of who is truly human and who is aberrant. And so we have fights over language. And so we have a kind of crisis around language today, a crisis of speech, a crisis of communication over what is said and what is unsaid, over what is said wrongly or at the wrong times and in the wrong place to the wrong people.

All of these things are the trouble that we experience. And by beginning with that early example of my own use of a word, which really should not be said to anybody, I'm saying to you that I own that problem. Because I believe that problem is not going to be solved by a policy. It's not going to be solved by a government. It's not going to be solved by some kind of university. I think first and foremost, it's a problem that we have to solve ourselves, and we have to solve each other. We have to develop a kind of ethics of speech that is distinctively Christian that is practiced in this concrete community in this time and this place. And doing so is essential. It will be the way we witness to the love of Christ here.

All of our readings give us some insights into the ethics of speech. And they go places where we have only been able to circle around over the past year and a half. In our reading from Isaiah, you have one ethics of speech. The first line of it is, "The Lord has given me the tongue of a teacher so that I may uphold the weary with a word." And it's there that you see a kind of articulation that the purpose of speech, the purpose of sharing a word is to uplift and to support and to care for and to nurture.

In the second stanza of that poem, there's another key move that is made. "Morning by morning God awakens me to listen as one who is taught." So part of the way in which you engage in proper speech, so our reading from Isaiah says, is you have to be a listener to God who is the one speaking the word to you. And all speech which matters, all speech that addresses who matters, all speech that speaks about who is worthy of respect and who is truly human has to be a kind of prayer kind of speech, a kind of dialogue that begins with God, where we listen for the word and speak it.

In our reading from James, you have another incredibly powerful ethics of speech that James wants to identify. And he does it with his usual colorful language in which he sees the tongue, a physical thing that can do good and bad, blessings and curses James writes, which in my case is literally true. But for

James the tongue, which can boast, is probably used as a way of building bridges, not tearing down, as he writes, the image of God in another. So James wants our speech to actually be a kind of expression of good intentions. A sharing, not of brackish water, which is water that is a bit salty, but rather fresh water, water that sustains, that is life.

And keep in mind that James is writing in a context in which water is scarce and valuable and worth the journey. So James is trying to invite his congregation into a different kind of ethics of speech, not speech that tears down, not speech that somehow boasts of what it does or does not do, not speech that criticizes, but speech that lifts up, that honors the image of God.

But today's gospel, in my opinion, provides us with the most important image of speech, because in it, Jesus says to the disciples, who do you say that I am? He invites them into what a philosopher would call a speech act. A moment of declaration, a kind of ascription and acceptance of Jesus. Who do you say that I am? And Peter says, you are the Messiah. And Jesus orders Peter, and the rest of the disciples to be quiet about it, because for Jesus, there is an intimate connection between what we say and what we do.

And that of course is self-evident. All of us know how easy it is for us to fall into behavior once speaking makes it so. There is this deep enmeshment between the things that happen and the words we use to describe it, and that kind of short circuit can lead us to some really dark places. But Jesus is saying that He is the word made flesh and the Messiah that He is one who will suffer and deny Himself so that He might die so that we might live. And it's in that transformation, in that speech act that God is truly revealed, that the word of God is truly revealed.

Soren Kierkegaard writing in the 19th century said that the test for a Christian is to make God the middle term in all their exchanges with another person. That is to say for Kierkegaard, the only way we can truly relate to another person is by letting God in Christ be the middle term. That when we try to simply have an unmediated relationship with each other, he writes, we always end up projecting on that person or exploiting them, or somehow denigrating them because our needs are endless.

But when God is the middle term, then God becomes a kind of verb that ties every subject and predicate together, so that everything we do comes through Christ to them and everything we receive comes through Christ to us. For Kierkegaard, Christ is the center of all speech and all action. And that is manifestly true in today's gospel.

So you and I have a task before us this year, you and I have the task of learning and expressing and working in this ethics of speech that is peculiarly Christian,

because no one else is going to do that. Because no one else has figured out a way around that, because part of the way in which Christian communities hold together is that we see Christ as the middle-term between us. And as we go through this difficult time and live through this crisis and language that we all have, we have to claim the communication that Christ has given us, we have to speak differently in a way that is grounded in the gospel.

I have a poem and a prayer to share with you to help you through that process of learning that speech, even better. To help you answer that question that Jesus asks us today, who do you say that I am? The first is from Pádraig Ó Tuama, an Irish poet. The title of it, ironically, is Prayer.

“Jesus of the dramatic word
from you we sometimes hear dystopia,
suns and moons and clouds and skies all falling,
and we miss the small words of love
that can sustain us through the winter.
In the dramas of news cycles,
helps us all- parishioners, preachers and politicians-
to enact love in the corners, queues and questions of our day,
and in so doing discover you,
hiding in the corner,
reaching out, like you always did, creating community.”

This year, as we come together to learn how to thrive, let us look for the Christ who is reaching out from the corner as he always did creating community.

The second thing I want to share with you is a prayer that was written by Father Mychal Judge, and it seems particularly appropriate on this, the 20th anniversary of 9/11. And I have in your bulletins, an insert that I hope you'll take and spend a bit of time thinking about and praying. This is an image of Mychal, who was the chaplain to the fire department. He was a Franciscan friar. He was active in a recovery movement and he was openly gay. And Mychal was also the first recorded casualty of 9/11. He went in with his men and he was hit by a piece of concrete inside the World Trade Center. And this picture records the moment in which he was retrieved and brought out just before the buildings collapsed.

Mychal has a prayer. And four days after he died, a group of his men, of his firefighters came together and prayed it.

“Lord, take me where You want me to go;
Let me meet who You want me to meet;
Tell me what You want me to say; and
Keep me out of your way.”

As we remember that day, and as we make our way as a community, as we answer the question, who do you say I am? May these words guide us. May we remember this; remember the heroes who answered the call and went into the building and served. And may we rest assured that the Word is with us and Christ is between us and will give us the words to say.

Amen.