

Sermon 8.16.20

May the words of our lips

On the sixth of March in 1957, the independent county of Ghana was formed from a former colony of the British empire in Africa. Martin Luther King was one of the American representatives who attended the formal transfer of power to the newly elected democratic government. Nations from around the world sent leaders to support this newest of nations. Dr King spoke of this event in a sermon he gave in Montgomery Alabama at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church on April 7th of that year.

In that sermon he described the process of achieving the independence of that nation. The new prime minister, Kwame Nkrumah, had been imprisoned for sedition for his writings about independence. Nkrumah had studied Ghandi and firmly believed in peaceful resistance as the way to transform an unjust system. He was elected as prime minister while still in prison and on inauguration day wore the clothes he had worn in prison to the ceremony. He came as a humble man who had suffered injustice for the freedom of his country but never advocated violence as a solution.

Dr. King's reflections in the sermon on this event are profound. Dr. King noted that the road to freedom is never easy. We must be willing to suffer to be free. That others may be violent towards those seeking freedom but that the response must be nonviolence. Nonviolent active resistance must be the road, no matter what the cost in life and persecution. And the reason this is absolutely necessary is that violence only begets violence. And that the most important thing to remember is, to quote Dr. King,

"We've got to revolt in such a way that after the revolt is over, we can live with people as their brothers and sisters... the aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community. The aftermath of nonviolence is redemption. "

We live in a time of strife and polarization. Few of us in Orwigsburg have been involved in strife on the streets of our great cities. Some of us have been involved in some local movements to hear and respond to issues in our own county. Fortunately, these responses have been nonviolent.

But this morning I want to speak to you about another form of violence many of us have taken part in. The violence that we can do with our words.

In the gospel this morning, Jesus tells his disciples that “it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles. What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person. (Matthew 15: 11-20)

I am a child of the 60s and 70s. I have seen what violence can do to American cities. I have seen what injustice looks like in America. I understand the pressure for change. I also understand the fear and resentment that peoples’ actions can cause in others. It can be confusing, angering, and overwhelming.

How as Christians are we to respond, no matter what polarized “side” we are on? How are we to respond if we, as Dr. King taught, we wish to end up being able to live as brothers and sisters when it is over?

We need to act with Christian love. And how are we to do this?

One of the most beautiful verses from the Old Testament tell us What God has asked of us “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

Jesus in the New Testament tells us “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matt. 5:9)

Jesus and his disciples suffered persecution and death without responding with violence. They responded with love. In Matthew, Jesus says: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?” (Matthew 5: 43-47)

We are to meet those we disagree with with love.

Words have great power whether we are alone in our own heads or with others. When we are with those who agree with us we can very easily slip into self-righteous degradation of others, “the other side”. Our own turmoil on the issues of the day can cause us to “unload” our anxiety and anger at situations on people we have never met. Whose lives and experiences we know nothing about. We set ourselves up as judge and jury despite Jesus’ warning in Matthew “Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you.” (Matthew 7: 1-2)

Words have great power.

An author recently wrote that “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.” (Hyder Zyhed)

Words are so important that in Buddhism one of the only 5 precepts for behavior is “right speech” which means abstaining from lying, refraining from divisive or abusive speech, and from idle chatter.

Our words shape and also limit the world we live in. People from other cultures develop many different words than we have based on their environment and lives. I learned words like haluski, halupki, schniz and knepp when I move to Schuylkill county. A child from a low-income family in the United States enters kindergarten with a listening vocabulary of 3000 words, compared to 20,000 for their middle income peers. The richness of the world we see, describe and experience is shaped by that vocabulary.

Most of us have pretty good vocabularies. We do not need to describe people in terms that would make our mothers blush. We do not need to describe groups of people as something we detest as if they are all the same. Because they are not.

I invite you to begin a civil conversation with someone who holds views that are different than yours. A good way to start is to set some agreements about how

you be with each other. How to hold civility between you. That each will have a chance to speak without being told that they are wrong. That each will keep the tone and nonverbals at a respectful level. Start with what you are in agreement on. That you both love your country. That you both want what is best for your family.

Then listen. Something very hard for us to do. Hear the other person. You are not there to debate them or convince them that they are wrong and you are right. You should be there to speak what is true and important for you and to give them the chance to do the same.

Life is full of paradox. We each are full of paradox. We all contain contradictory features and qualities. And that is who we are. Each of us has a unique history, unique heritage, unique education, unique experiences in the world.

But each of us is also a Christian. We are called to love each other. We need to treat each other and these times so that at the end we can, as Dr. King says, we can live with people as their brothers and sisters...

I invite you to listen to yourself. Check any angry words against groups and people. Then move to listening and finally talking with those who believe differently than you do.

And now, I never thought I would be quoting from Thunder/Enlightening in the Pottsville Republican but on Tuesday someone said it very well: "Can we stop calling each other names like socialists and right-wingers? Instead can we talk about things that are important to us?"

Being a Christian is important to us.

May the words of our lips and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord.