

The Power of Words – Brian Hartley

Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

If we needed a reminder of the power of words and the fear they can provoke, we need have looked no further than this past week's episode of what some considered an innocuous, uplifting address by the President to a group of school children and others a potentially ideologically-divisive and perhaps even brain-washing technique employed by a frightening and powerful left-wing radical. I learned at a rather early age the power of words. Moving as we did from community to community during my elementary school years, it became difficult to forge lasting relationships. My best friends were usually a collection of books which I kept concealed in the rather brightly-plaid satchel my mother had bought for me. That satchel seemed to elicit more than its fair share of jeers from others. When I began to take the bus to school, I always sat near the front so that I could quickly scurry away before the Neanderthals at the back could follow. But, occasionally, I wasn't quick enough and I found myself surrounded by three or four of them boxing me in, like a pack of wolves moving in for the kill. That satchel was my first line of defense, as I would wield it overhead like Arthur's Excalibur or Little John's oaken staff. But on one particular day, the satchel was snatched from my hands and I found myself pinned beneath several hundred pounds of sweaty, testosterone-laced male muscle.

I wish I could call to memory what I said. For the life of me, I simply don't remember. I'm sure it came from the depths of my bruised self, lashing out at these behemoths with the only weapon left to hand. What I do recall is the sharp intake of breath and the animal-like rage that those words provoked from my captors. I do remember seeing out of the corner of my eye someone charging at me with a weapon he had discovered in the garage behind us—what turned out to be a seven-iron golf club. I had only time to jerk my head to the right in a kind of reflexive motion before the hard metal came crashing into my head. An inch higher and it would have crushed the left orbital cavity, leaving me a twin to my grandfather who had had his eye removed thirty years earlier. Instead, it gouged out a chunk of flesh just below the eye which created a veritable bloody mess when I pressed my hand to it. Seven stitches that cut required and a nasty wound it left me with. Over forty years later it is mostly healed now, but if you look closely you can see the jagged silvery line of a scar that remains a concrete reminder that words do, indeed, elicit a response; that they are powerful instruments for either destruction or healing.

All of today's texts remind us of this truth. In our opening lesson from Proverbs 1 we find ourselves immersed in the second of twelve extended speeches in the opening nine chapters. The speaker is none other than Lady Wisdom, a popular figure in the ancient near east, who beckons her hearers away from "waywardness" and "complacency." Roland Murphy, perhaps the single most important recent scholar who works in the field of Wisdom Literature, suggests

that Lady Wisdom is a complex figure, born of God. She is no generic “it,” but the form in which God makes God’s self present and in which he wishes to be sought by man (ABD VI: 927). Portrayed in this way, this female figure carries her message into the very busiest corners of city life. As prophetess or teacher, she serves as a counterpart to the other street-walking feminine form who will pervade the pages of Proverbs and poses great danger to the young man who serves as the intended audience for the authorial father-figure.

The words spoken here are couched in the form of a lament (“How long?” the woman twice asks). What is most interesting is that the writer’s vocabulary is not the typical prophetic word, but the language of wisdom teachers. The heinous sin is the foolishness of students who sit in the back of the class and make fun of the teacher and of the subject-matter. They are portrayed as refusing to pay attention, of being simple-minded and scoffing. Behind this pedagogical paradigm stands a conviction that God is a god of order who has created a world of coherence and meaning waiting to be discovered and explored. We find here a window on one side of the dialogue that would define the nature of the post-Exilic community as they swung between the purveyors of traditional wisdom, as portrayed particularly in this book, and those of non-traditional wisdom as it is captured in such texts as Ecclesiastes. More than anything else, this was a battle for the hearts and minds of the young carried out on the battlefield of words, at schools, synagogues, and even on street corners.

Something of that debate can be seen in the text from today’s Psalter, as well. Here, God’s wisdom is to be discovered first in the book of nature, and alongside it, the book of the law, or Torah. The doxological language invites us to contemplate God’s wisdom by immersing ourselves in the natural world and the text moves from the macrocosm of the enormity of the heavens to the quotidian movement of the sun arcing across the sky. Like the earlier reading from Proverbs, this hymn of praise postulates an ordered world which is reflected as well in Yahweh’s life-giving Torah. Just as the Creator of the Universe has graced us with the daily gift of the sun which generates in its recipients energy and vitality, likewise, his law is meant to “revive the soul” and “rejoice the heart.”

The shape of the middle section of this psalm reminds us of both God’s ordered world and the power of words as it marches through six parallel statements in each of which God is mentioned specifically by name and the Torah is designated by different terms, such as “law” or “decrees.” Above all else, the Psalmist pictures for his hearers a world that is structured by God and in which God’s grace permeates both the natural world and the interior world transformed by the power of the words of Torah. As Walter Brueggemann comments of such an ordered universe, “when one accepts one’s role and identity as God’s creature and lives in trustful response to the gift of God, one can enact all the glorious liberty of an unencumbered creature, beloved and empowered by the Creator,” (Texts for Preaching—Year B, 508).

The final recognizable verse of the Psalm reinforces this need for response on behalf of the hearers. Recognizing God’s gifts of creation and life-giving word necessitates from us a sense of trustful submission. Just as there is order in the universe and order in God’s Word, we, as

petitioners, are in need of having our lives “reordered” by God. The prayer which has preceded this closing statement in the preceding verses is a recognition of our tendency to fall into error and commit transgressions against God. That is why when we find ourselves living into the Divine Office and joining together in Morning Prayer on a regular basis, we always begin with Cranmer’s words that frame our Confession of Sin: “so that we may prepare ourselves in heart and mind to worship God, let us kneel in silence, and with penitent and obedient hearts confess our sins, that we may obtain forgiveness by his infinite goodness and mercy,” (Book of Common Prayer, 79). By beginning with confession, we join with the Psalmist in recognizing God as both Creator and Redeemer, as well as allowing God’s Word to shape and mold us into praiseful, obedient, and trusting creatures.

But if words of confession have the power to positively reshape us and mold us into the Master’s use, words of intemperance and anger have the opposite power—capable of wounding and crippling all those who come within earshot. Earlier in James’ epistle, he had admonished his readers to “be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger,” (1:19). In today’s passage, he will further unpack the negative implications of that earlier admonition. And, let me just say, as a faculty member and Dean of the Chapel who makes a living primarily in contexts where I am dependent on words, the phrase, “not many of you should become teachers” is none too comforting! Making a living via one’s tongue, the writer suggests, poses particular problems. Those problems are fleshed out via two primary analogies—that of a ship’s rudder and, perhaps closer to home for those of us who have watched in horror the recent conflagration in southern California, the power of a raging fire. In both cases, the primary issue seems to be one of control. As with my opening illustration, a few misspoken words have almost unlimited power to unleash an entire range of emotions that may also incorporate physical violence.

With those of us in the teaching profession, there seems to be a special danger when it comes time to transmitting the traditions that have been handed on to us. Having access to specialized knowledge and having been credentialed in a field perhaps ensures some quality control over the mastery of information but it does not necessarily ensure wisdom in the one with the degree. I think most of us could cite examples of folks we know who are brilliant and skilled when it comes to sheer brain power, but come across as intemperate, intimidating, and sometimes just plain rude. Abuse and arrogance are always ugly when seen up close, but never more so than in someone whose knowledge we respect. I can remember working as an orderly as a teenager in coronary care with three skilled heart surgeons—some of the very best in their field. They each brandished credentials from respected institutions and were representative of three different generations. I can tell you that the youngest, the brightest, the most gifted, and the best credentialed of the three was also the one least able to connect with patients and health care staff. Nurses cringed in the corner when they saw him coming and patients were oftentimes left in tears. A surgeon with a deft touch when it came to the scalpel was much less skilled when it came time to working with emotions and words.

Yet, it is unfair of me to single out medical experts when I think that it is religious teachers that the writer may here have in mind. Those of us who work with religious knowledge are perhaps

the most frightening when it comes to the use of the tongue. As Fred Craddock says, “Not without reason does religion produce more than its share of fanatics, teachers expert in using words, preachers as skillful wordsmiths, who let their language get away from them. Qualifiers,” he says, “soon disappear, along with ambiguities. Before long, words are whittling away, and truth lies a bleeding victim,” (Preaching through the Christian Year—Year B, 411). And, given what we know of the early church through the lens of texts such as the epistles of the Apostle Paul, we may be wise to assume that religious language and its practitioners was cutting a wide swath through the apostolic church, just as it continues to do so today. If the picture in the selection from today’s Psalm is one of the listener rightly praising God and bowing in humble obedience, the epistolary lection offers its opposite in the one who is capable of cursing God and pouring forth “brackish water” from the mouth.

But the reality is that oftentimes these are not two separate persons. The world does not always divide easily up into good and evil, those in white hats and those in black. Instead, when we look in the mirror, we discover the capacity to be either of these two. And no one models that more clearly or learned that difficult lesson more forthrightly than did the most animated disciple of Jesus, Simon Peter. You remember Peter, the guy whose top two strengths are Command and Belief. This is the guy always tripping over himself, according to Mark’s gospel, always out in front without taking pause to think. You know, Peter, the guy whose motto is: “Ready, fire, aim!”

What is so fascinating about the text is how quickly in the narrative Peter goes from being the hero out front with the words of confession to the devil incarnate engaged in a mutual rebuking session with the one he has just declared the Christ. If one has been paying attention to the language the gospel writer uses throughout the first half of the narrative, one is brought up short by the fact that the verbiage here is exactly the same as Jesus uses to silence the demons who have challenged his authority. Peter here is pictured as a brilliant student who gets the right answer but fails to recognize the implications of his insight. If I were using a pedagogical analogy, I might suggest that the chief of the apostles has achieved the heights of interpretive power but has little ability to apply his insight to the concrete world in which he lives. The result is not only wrong thinking but an attempt to correct the Master in his teaching. The mistake that Peter makes is that he thinks he understands the Jesus of the first half of Mark’s gospel—the one who exercises authority (*exousia*) with great power. The problem is that he fails to understand where this will lead in the second half of the narrative—the inevitable subjugation of that power to a much higher purpose in and through the ignominious death suffered on a cross. The call to discipleship which ends today’s gospel reading should give us pause, for Christ’s admonition to “take up the cross” is nothing less than a beckoning on our part to not only understand with Peter but to follow with Jesus.

In his collection of Beecher Lectures later published under the title, *The End of Words: The Language of Reconciliation in a Culture of Violence*, Duke preaching professor, Richard Lischer, suggests that we live in what he calls “the Argument Culture” in which the very technology that we have birthed operates via a dialectic of one-upmanship. Into this culture, he claims,

preachers are called to speak in a different language, a language of reconciliation. Given our culture climate, though, it is easy to fall back into the cadences of the oratory which surrounds us. For, he claims, “the rhetoric of conflict perches like a vulture on the language of peace,” (154). “Our predecessors,” he says, “were trained to defend the truth and to demolish the claims of the opposition, to attack every weakness, to shoot down all their arguments, to score points, and to win,” (155).

Far from calling for panty-waisted preachers, however, Lischer reaches out to the preaching of Barth, Bonhoeffer, and Martin Luther King, Jr., as models of prophetic agents of peace. He calls for sermons that are more broadly narrative rather than persuasive or argumentative; sermons that start, not from the errors of our enemies but from the Lord’s truth as we know and practice it (163). He concludes: “our leading homiletical subject is not ‘they,’ by which we characterize a shadowy, collective Other, but we: ‘We believe, teach, and confess,’” (163). Preaching in such a way, he says, demands that we immerse ourselves in the language of the Psalter and the life of the worshipping community.

All of which brings us back around to where we began a few minutes ago with a story about a golf club and a few imprecatory words. To be honest, I’m not sure my use of language has improved very much from those primary school years. I still have a tendency to use words carelessly and cuttingly. Like Peter, I am tempted to try and correct my Master when he gets it wrong. I don’t let others finish what they have to say because I think my words are much more important and I’m concerned that I get my two-cents worth in. And even though I understand conceptually a different kind of rhetoric and have even been known to teach it, I oftentimes don’t practice what I preach. In short, I am in need of rebuke as much as was Peter.

But I have a feeling that I’m not alone in this venture, that my stumblings are neither unique or atypical. So it is that we find ourselves beckoned back onto the Via Dolorosa (the Way of the Cross) as we continue through these final dusty days of the summer season. After all, this is not a journey that we need walk alone, for the Master has gone before us. And, we have each other for companions to pull us back onto the road whenever we veer off or fall flat on our faces. In the meantime, let us not forget the power of words to either bless or curse. And may we begin to allow the words of the text and of the liturgy to call us repentance and to covenant together that we will submit our wills to His, or words to His. And may God give us the grace so to do. Amen.