

13 September 2015 (16th Sunday After Pentecost/24th Sunday in Ordinary Time)
Lafayette Presbyterian Church

“Sacred Speech”

Mark 8:27-38

For one of my tours in the Navy, I served with Fourth Marine Air Wing as the Assistant Wing Chaplain. We had many reserve chaplains and enlisted chaplains’ assistants serving with Marines, so once a year, at the direction of our reserve admiral, we held a conference to address issues that would enable our folks to do a good job of providing religious ministry. One of my colleagues, a chaplain who served with Fourth Marine Division, and I were in charge of running this workshop, and it was a big job. But it turned out that the biggest part of the job was keeping the admiral happy. One afternoon just before the start of the next workshop, I was walking down the hall and noticed my colleague sitting on a bench, just staring. I paused to look at him and said, “Dave? Are you alright?” Looking as though he had been kicked in the stomach, he gazed up at me and said, “I’ve just been dressed down by the admiral.” “Why?” I asked—because Dave was one of the best and most competent chaplains I had ever worked with. “Well,” he said, “apparently I didn’t set up the room exactly the way he wanted.” I learned later that several people who witnessed Dave’s “dressing down” walked away with a greatly diminished view of our admiral. That speech had nothing to do with correction; it was all about asserting power.

We encounter examples every day of speech that devastates, and speech that offers hope; of speech that tears down, and speech that builds up. There probably isn’t a person here who hasn’t born the brunt of an insult, or been the butt of a tasteless joke, or received destructive criticism that left you feeling demoralized. Young people growing up in this culture are having to deal with being bullied and destroyed on social media, which by its very nature invites a kind of pack mentality where others join in casting verbal stones. Destructive speech can drive a person to suicide. It may not be the only factor, but there are too many examples to ignore where such speech has been the last straw to push a person over the edge. As the Letter of James expresses so vividly in today’s reading, the tongue is a fire, and can set an entire forest ablaze. No wonder we admire people who show restraint in their speech, who think before speaking, the current political theater aside.

When we consider the power of speech, of course we agree that speech should be positive, that it should be constructive, and that especially in the church, we of all people should set the example of speech that honors God and honors others as children of God. But theory is one thing. Practice is quite another. The fact is, we often speak as though we weren’t thinking about God at all. We allow our anger and our feelings of inadequacy to get the better of us, and we say things to each other that we end up deeply regretting. What makes us do that? If we know better, and if sacred speech—words that reflect the love of God—is so powerful, then why don’t we always use it? The admiral I mentioned earlier wasn’t an awful person—what made him publically tear into another chaplain the way he did? What makes any of us lose our cool and forget the author of our faith?

Today's reading from the Gospel of Mark is set in a context of conflict that ends up in a showdown over sacred speech. We know that Jesus has already tangled with the scribes and Pharisees over the issue of the Law of God, over what it really means to live God's Law in thought, word, and deed. We know that Jesus then withdrew to another country to be by himself, only to find faith most unexpectedly in a Gentile woman of Syrophenician origin. When Jesus returns to the region around the Sea of Galilee, his acts of healing completely astound people, who express praise and amazement for the way "he does all things well." But after Jesus feeds four thousand people in a deserted place where no one would have expected to find enough food for everyone, he continues to encounter resistance. The Pharisees demand a sign from heaven as authentication of his claims, and his disciples are fixated on the fact that they forgot to bring lunch on the boat. Jesus chides them for failing to see the power and presence of God in their midst, and then (fittingly) he restores sight to a blind man at Bethsaida. But we get the unmistakable feeling that the tension is building. Jesus is increasingly at odds with the religious authorities, and he is having more and more trouble getting through to his disciples. How, we wonder, will all this end?

Well, it ends with Jesus returning to square one with his disciples, and forthrightly talking about his own end in the prophetic tradition of sacred speech. By asking his disciples who other people think he is, and then who they think he is, he is trying to establish his identity with the very people who have answered the call to follow him. Identifying him with John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the prophets, would make him a mere echo of someone else. But when Peter identifies him as the Christ, the Messiah, Jesus realizes that he has something to work with, so he immediately teaches the disciples about his own end through prophetic sacred speech. What happens next, with Peter's resistance and Jesus' strong rebuke, hardly sounds like what we would expect to be sacred speech. But we must understand what makes Jesus' words sacred, and why he had to convey this core of his calling to his disciples. Jesus explains that unless the cross stands at the center, unless his suffering and death are the core experiences that give rise to new life, there can be no sacred speech. And unless those who follow him allow the cross to take center stage in their life, they can neither understand nor give voice to sacred speech. To be ashamed of these words, Jesus said, places a person on the wrong side of God.

Now, when we read this account, it sounds so uncompromising, we find ourselves sympathizing with Peter, wishing we could save Jesus from himself. But this is precisely the genius of Mark's Gospel. Mark successfully draws us into the conflict, the spiritual drama that characterized Jesus' relationships—not only with the scribes and the Pharisees, but also with his disciples. When Jesus is described in the Gospels and in the writings of Paul as a stumbling block, a roadblock to belief, the core of the offense is the cross. Not only is Jesus' own death a matter of horror and confusion, the call to die with him is something we find ourselves instinctively resisting. Of course Peter tried to pull Jesus back from the brink. But in that moment Peter illustrated the key barrier to the sacred, to the meaning of the Messiah, that Jesus had been trying to convey. Unless the disciples could embrace Jesus' suffering and death, they could not be his followers or share in his life.

In the church, we can easily adopt the mindset that responsibility for the sacred and the holy are up to us. After all, we're the ones who maintain the building, teach Sunday School, greet newcomers when they enter, and offer food and assistance to those in need. And when we walk into this sacred space, we make a conscious effort to be pleasant and kind because we associate those qualities with the church. But in so doing we fail to understand that sacred speech is not a matter of being pleasant and kind. As Peter found out, the prophetic speech of Christ is fierce and focused on the cross. It is not a happy mask that we slap on our faces, or a set of behaviors we're supposed to adopt when we walk into the church.

Sometimes when we enter this space, we're not feeling good at all. We may be carrying heavy burdens, and we don't feel like smiling. Maybe it's been a horrible week and you're exhausted, or you're grieving the loss of a loved one, or you're angry with someone. At that point, what sense does it make that you're now supposed to come up with sacred speech? Or that you're responsible for the holiness of this space? Not only does it not make sense, it also is not why we gather here, or how we learn to speak the words of Christ. As Jesus taught his disciples, sacred speech is a matter of dying to our desire for power and control over our own life or other people's lives. Sacred speech begins with bringing our grief and our sorrow, our suffering and our longing, to lay at the foot of the cross. And when we do that, we discover in Christ a friend and redeemer, a savior and an ally, who walks alongside us to share the load and engage us in the holy conversation of comfort, forgiveness, and mercy. It is only when we have that encounter with the risen Christ who died for us, that we can hear and understand and ourselves convey sacred speech.

Today's reading from Isaiah begins with a very telling phrase to describe the prophetic tradition of sacred speech in which Jesus stood: "The Lord God has given me the tongue of those who are taught, that I may know how to sustain with a word him who is weary." It isn't, "the tongue of those who are eloquent," or "the tongue of those who are smart"—not what we might think. According to the prophet Isaiah, in this passage widely interpreted as a reference to God's Messiah, sacred speech begins with being taught of God, with listening first to the Spirit of God, without whom we cannot know what it is to speak in a qualitatively different way than the world speaks. Our model for such speech is our redeemer, savior, and friend, Jesus Christ, the incarnation of God, the full representation of all that is holy and sacred. Thank God for this gift of sacred speech that comes not from us, but from the author and perfecter of our faith.



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