



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

The Power and Consequence of Words

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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My old theology professor, Clark Williamson, might as well be here in the pulpit with me for every time I started thinking about this week's lessons, I heard his voice as if I were back in class. Isaiah and James both talk about teaching and teachers. Both make it clear that it not an easy thing to do. Of course their teaching is in the context of religion - teaching and talking about God. We call that theology and trust me, it's a minefield when you talk about it in public. But what Clark said is that everything we do or say teaches something, whether or not you are talking theology. Our actions teach other what we think, what we care about and what we believe. The reason that it is so fraught with challenge is, as the Letter of James has been telling us for weeks now, saying one thing and doing another will expose one as a fraud at worst and inconsistent at best. Here Clark's favorite word kept coming to me, coherence. He taught this in the context of a year-long systematic theology class, saying that all of the pieces of your belief system have to hang together. If some part of your theology is at odds with other parts, then you lack coherence. For us, when our words and actions do not reflect what we claim to believe, our lives lack coherence.

The on-line world has shown us how easy it is to say anything, without consequences. Anonymous writing, posting and commenting allow for the absolute worst in us to be flung into the public arena. It is as if one's social inhibitions, one's mental governor, had been removed or at least compromised with massive amounts of alcohol. After last Saturday's firehouse blessing, I went looking for articles about the day. Now, I know that there was considerable controversy about the cost of the facility but I was unprepared for the vitriol that was spewed in the comment sections of a couple of the local on-line papers. It was nothing short of shocking. Those who made the decision were pilloried as graft taking, blood-sucking demons and the firefighters as lazy, over-paid spoiled children. I was left thinking that these people obviously never saw the movie *Bambi* or heard the wisdom of Thumper the rabbit's mother, "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all." Apparently the rule has changed. Now it's closer to, "If you have the chance, say something hateful.", especially since you can say it anonymously. I love the Internet but this is its poisonous fruit. I seriously doubt if any of those commentators would say such things in the light of day or in the presence of someone they respect. Speech is a powerful thing. For those of us in the Judeo-Christian tradition, all things began with God speaking a word and there was light and everything else after that. God's spoken will was creative and drew forth beauty from within the heart of God. However you imagine that to have happened, it hinges on an idea spoken. The Bible has a lot to say about the power of things spoken. The Book of Proverbs is a compendium of Wisdom teachings, an early Thumper's mother. Here are a couple of pearls about speech;

"The words of the reckless pierce like swords, but the **tongue** of the wise brings healing;
A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up **anger**.
Gold there is, and rubies in abundance, but **lips** that speak knowledge are a rare jewel."
A lying **tongue** hates those it hurts, and a flattering mouth works ruin.

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One of the Ten Commandments forbids dishonesty – “You shall not be a false witness.” It speaks for itself. This week we saw violence erupt in the Middle East over a hateful, lying, portrayal of the Prophet Mohammad in a cheap film released on the internet that was drenched in dishonesty. We have regular debates in this country about the First Amendment guarantee of free speech. What is not spelled out in the Constitution is the responsibility that goes with such a right. This film is the ultimate screaming “fire” in a crowded theater. Over the years, we have witnessed violent reactions to cartoons and novels that have been deemed offensive by some in the Muslim world. This film was designed to stoke those fires of discord. And now good people are dead and violent chaos is surging. But that’s the point. What does this form of speech teach us about is what is in the heart of the filmmaker? There is within Christianity a belief held by some about the return of Jesus which will come after a world war that begins in the Middle East. You can read all about it in the book of Revelation. Such believers are called Dispensationalists and there are a significant number of them. They gravitate around the halls of power. There are those who eagerly, to the point of inciting such a war, believe that they can help things along. This week shows us how dangerous such intentionally incendiary speech is. While true diplomacy seeks to calm the waters of conflict, a powder keg can be easily ignited by dangerous words.

I keep telling you that it is important to know what you believe and that your life should be evidence of it. It’s also important to be aware of what motivates the words and actions of others. Words have the power to wound but they also have the power to heal and that should be our goal. While reading about the death of Ambassador Stevens, I came across an amazing video made by an Israeli graphic designer named Ronny Edry. He was tired of all of the talk of hatred and war and so he reached out to the people of Iran in the only way he could. He started posting pictures of himself, his family, neighbors and friends on Facebook with a simple message laid over them “Iranians, we will never bomb your country, we love you.” It spread like wildfire in Israel and then someone from Iran saw it. Facebook was the only way that they could possibly speak to each other because there are no phone connections between the two countries. The messages from Iran have been flooding in to the Facebook page, echoing Ronny Edry’s hopes. One said “We share a common history, have been sharing both our great and ancient cultures, languages and poetry together. ... We are so similar, and politicians cannot cut a tie that has been tied thousands of years ago. I am proud to have you as my friends.” That is the power of words. What the Bible says about speech is that it is necessary to guard it well, to use it judiciously and honestly. As important as the saying of words is it is also important to develop the skill of listening. Listening is more than hearing; it is discerning meaning and intention. We are equally responsible for our reaction to someone’s words as they are in speaking them. When you come across something distressing, public displays of hatred and anger, take a moment to consider what those words teach you, what fear is being expressed. When people are afraid, afraid that they are losing something, that the world has moved somewhere without them, that they have become unimportant and ignored, they are not likely to teach love but how we respond to it can. “The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher that I may sustain the weary with a word.”

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