

Words Matter

Epiphany 4 B

Dt.18:15-20 1 Cor. 8:1-13 Mk.1:21-28

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I find that I am becoming increasingly disturbed by the notion in our nation that the words that we say really don't matter. In that notion, it seems that we can say whatever we want, regardless of how hurtful or how threatening, because we really aren't meaning to be hurtful or threatening.

Interestingly, all three lessons for today address that notion, it seems to me. And what they say is this: WORDS MATTER. What words we say MATTER. And words have consequences. That's what our lessons for today tell us.

In the first lesson, we hear Moses telling the people that God will raise up "a prophet like me," like Moses, who will lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. Moses has reached the end of his journey, and it's time to pass the leadership mantle to another. So Moses is assuring the people that God will take care of them. God's new prophet will speak God's words, he tells them. And the people will be able to trust those words and should follow those words and be accountable to those words. But if that prophet dares to speak his own words and not God's words, "that prophet shall die," it says there.

Words matter. Words have consequences. We ought to be able to trust the words that we hear, this lesson says – especially when it's God's word.

Similarly in our second lesson, St. Paul presses on the fact that some of the church folk in Corinth are running around using popular sayings and clever turns of phrase to justify some of their questionable behaviors, and in so doing, they are leading other members of the church astray.

Words matter, he basically tells them. Words and actions that you only apply to yourself without ever considering that they might affect another is a sin. It's a sin because it's self-serving and not loving of others. Yes, you have liberty in all things, says Paul. "But take care that this liberty of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak."

Words matter. Words have consequences. Especially when they come out of the mouths of those who influence the lives of others.

Finally in the gospel for today, Jesus goes into a synagogue in Capernaum. And there he teaches, the gospel tells us. Teaches what? Teaches about God, most likely. Teaches what the scriptures tell us about God and about the ways of God, most likely.

Teaches things like this: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut.6:5). And this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev.19:18). And this, "On these two

commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt.22:40).

Words. Powerful words. Trustworthy words. Words that matter. Words that have consequences. Good consequences.

And as a result, all those who were in the synagogue that day “were astounded at *Jesus’* teaching, for he taught them as one having authority.” They were astounded, it says. Even before the interruption of that man with the demon. They were already astounded by the power and authority in *Jesus’* words, even before that interruption, it says.

But then that interruption does come. And that interruption is not a pleasant one. It was an interruption into all that was good. It was an interruption into all that was holy. It was an interruption of the voice of evil and destruction that grabbed the attention of all and challenged the good and the holy. And it was a formidable voice – a voice that could have run off everyone who was there seeking the truth and power of God.

But it didn’t. Because *Jesus*, the one with authority, the one with the acknowledged teaching authority who clearly had connection with the holy God above, applied his words – his good and meaningful words – to the situation.

“Be silent,” he tells the demon, “and come out of him!” he commands. And the demon did come out. And the man was healed and made whole. Because that’s what the words of God do. That’s what words that matter do. They heal and make whole.

Words matter. How we use them matter. And because of that, words have consequences.

I become so dismayed hearing the blazing chorus of words that have been filling the air waves and public discourse since the U.S. Capitol riots of January 6. Mean words, bullying words, threatening words, destructive words. I had hoped that people would be more reflective and cautious about their words after that riot, but not so it would seem. Instead it just seems to get worse. And crazier.

And it just leaves all of us in such a quandary of fear and disillusion, until we can hardly tell whose words are trustworthy or not.

Thankfully, *Jesus*, the teacher and authority whose words are always trustworthy, guides us here with another of his teachings. In his Sermon on the Mount, *Jesus* says this:

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. *You will know them by their fruits.* Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit.... Thus *you will know them by their fruits*” (Matt.7:15-20).

In essence, *Jesus* is telling us that you really can see what motivates a person by what they do and what they say. If a person is motivated by God, you can see it – in their words and in their actions. If a person is motivated by good, you can see it – in their words and actions. If a person is motivated by love of neighbor, you can see it – in their words and actions.

For these people, they know that their words matter. And they pick those words very carefully. Not to falsify or mislead. Not to play political tricks for political gain. But to truly choose words that are loving and caring and concerned

about others and concerned about the good of all. You can see what motivates these folks. You can see it, and you know them by their fruits.

It is a sad time in our nation. And it just seems to get sadder. We ought to be happier. We ought to be happier because we have finally gotten to the point of vaccine distribution. Sure, we're frustrated by the lack of organization in that distribution, but we're at least glad that it's coming, and we ought to be happier.

Instead we are distracted by this constant barking of words that are so filled with violence and hate and division and acrimony throughout our society. Instead we are distracted by interruptions that are so much like the man with the demon in our gospel for today.

Trust that Jesus is as in control today as he was in the synagogue in Capernaum that day long ago. Trust that Jesus will not let the evil to overwhelm us.

But at the same time, be careful. Do not fall into the trap of following where these destructive voices are leading. Do not add your own frustrated voice to the mix.

Recognize that words matter. Recognize that you are called by another voice whose words are trustworthy and true. You are called by one whose authority supersedes all others, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Follow him and his words of love for God and love for neighbor. Speak words that matter always. And by your example, let us lead others away from this senseless violence of words throughout our land.