

The double-edged power of words (Matins Ron Flaming 20180916)

Introduction

On July 3rd a small group met in Betty Thiessen's dining room to plan for Matins worship this fall. Each of us left that meeting with a task. My task was to draft wording for the sections of the litany that change seasonally.

When I sent out my draft, Elmer replied with questions and suggestions about the exact wording. In the email he said "I think words are important and I know you agree." He was right, I also know words are important. So we corresponded about the exact wording in the litany that you are using today.

A few weeks later I agreed to bring the homily this morning and I read the scripture texts again. I began with Isaiah 50:4

*"The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher,
that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word"*.

Emails about exact wording. A word that sustains the weary. The Holy Spirit was letting me know that this homily needed to be about the power of words. Words we read, words we speak to one another.

Then I went on to read the rest of verse 4 and on to verse 5 of Isaiah 50.

*"Morning by morning he awakens – awakens my ear, to listen as those who are taught"
The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward."*

Yes, the power of words is evoked in speaking them. We often forget the necessary corollary ... the power of words lies equally in the listening. The double-edged power of words is displayed in speaking and in listening. To re-phrase an old philosophical puzzle "If there is no one listening, has a word really been spoken?"

The Lord God has opened my ear. The Lord God opened my ear in order that I might listen like one being taught, an attentive student. Even though Isaiah is a written book, the prophet was likely still in living memory of the practices of oral tradition. So the image of "one who is being taught" is the image of a student listening intently to what the teacher is saying so that it can be learned by heart and repeated word for word.

Listening

When God opens the ear of the prophet it is not only, or even, the ear of the physical body, but the ear of the whole person; the ear of the heart, mind and spirit. When God opens Isaiah's ear the prophet is listening with his whole being and truly understanding what God is saying so that he can speak that word aloud to sustain the weary. That is the role of prophet, to listen to God, and then speak to the people.

When the prophet listens to the Word like this, letting it sink to the depths of his being, then it transforms and directs his actions in life. He does not rebel, does not turn back from his task of speaking the Word from God he has heard and absorbed even when it leads to insult and suffering. Every time we read our litany before hearing the Scripture readings in our worship we pray that listening to the Gospel will transform us, that listening to the Word of God spoken will change us inside and out.

When we listen with our whole being, the words we hear have the power to change us. Here we come to another corollary. When we listen with our whole being words have deep impact on us, *and* on the flipside, when we truly listen to another person, we empower their words. When we really listen to *another* person we empower *their* words.

A retired psychiatric nurse volunteers at HOF supportive housing. Her main task is to listen to lonely people. Or to listen to people talk about things that no one else wants to listen to. Tenants look forward to her visits. Her listening builds up people used to being marginalized by validating them as worthy of being listened to.

The power of listening to words.

To be clear, there is also power in listening to the silence of another, which expresses realities that cannot be put into mere words. A stereotypical example is of sitting with another person in their grief when we are not listening to words being spoken, but sitting in silence, attentive to the churning of the heart and spirit.

Words are powerful not only because of who says them, but also because somebody listens.

Speaking

Our passage from the Letter of James this morning has a lot to say about the tongue, a small body part that has huge influence like a small rudder on a large boat. When

talking about the tongue this letter is of course focusing on the words we speak. I want to highlight a comment from verse 10, namely, that we can speak words of blessing or of cursing from the same mouth. The Buddha is reported to have said something very similar, “words have the power to both destroy and heal. When words are both true and kind, they can change our world”.

As the letter of James indicates, our words carry the power to curse or to bless.

What James calls “words of blessing” recalls 2Cor12 where Paul says everything he does (and says) is for the sake of building up the church. It is not misrepresenting the text of James to interpret words of “blessing” as pointing to the same reality as Paul’s metaphor of “building up” the church. When we speak, our words convey our intent to build up or to tear down, to bless or curse. True words, whether affirming or confronting, when spoken with the energy of kindness are words that build up.

Do all the words I speak build up? Do the words formed by my tongue carry the intent of blessing, or of cursing? Is my habit of making comments that I think so clever and humourous really such a delight to others? When I declare my disagreement with you do my words convey my intent to prove you wrong, or my commitment to discovering truth together.

Conclusion

The double-sided power of words.

The Lord GOD has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he wakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. The Lord GOD has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward.

So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.

The double-edged power of words to transform. The power of words to bless and build up when spoken with truth and kind intent. The power for words to build up when blessed with listening.

May your words be a blessing to those who receive them. May your listening bless the words of those you open your ear to. Amen.