

Proper 17, Year B RCL  
Sunday, September 2, 2018  
St. George's Episcopal Church  
Phil Hovey

Song of Solomon 2:8–13; Psalm 45:1–2, 7–10; James 1:17–27, Mark 7:1–8, 14–15, 21–23

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight,

Oh Lord, my strength and my redeemer. (Ps 19:14)

These words from Psalm 19 are a perfect introduction to my theme. Today's texts from The Song of Solomon, from Psalm 45, from James' epistle, and Mark's Gospel offer a rich store to draw from for a dense sermon on theology and religion, on worship and liturgy, or living and behaving.

But hey, it's Labor Day weekend, it's beautiful outside, and you probably want to get on with the rest of your weekend. So, I'll just focus on this one simple idea: the words of our mouth—our voice.

Let the words of my mouth . . . bring pleasure:

Consider this from The Song of Solomon: "The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes . . . My beloved speaks and says to me: 'Arise my love, my fair one, and come away.'"

It is her lover's voice that creates the joy in her heart, that enchants her, that quickens her pulse.

There is a joy in hearing the voice of a loved one, a family member, or a friend, whether on the phone or face to face over coffee, tea, or a glass of beer that far outdoes an e-mail or text message with its alphabet soup of initials and acronyms and emoticons and emojis.

This spring I was at my high school class reunion. As part of the planning team I was in e-mail contact with some of them. We got reacquainted somewhat catching up on each others' lives. But it was the talking with them face to face at the reunion, hearing their voices, seeing their expressions that made fifty years evaporated in an instant.

Over the course of our marriage, Jen and I have spent much time apart. But hearing each other's voice on phone calls, and later on Skype, kept the flame strong and reminded us how much we each longed to be with the other.

Let the words of my mouth . . . uplift:

Your voice can bring joy, it can make one smile, it can make another laugh, or it can bring comfort to yet another. Your voice can be a gift that uplifts.

Consider this from Psalm 45: "My heart is stirring with a noble song; let me recite

what I have fashioned for the king; \* my tongue shall be the pen of a skilled writer.”

A few years ago at a theatre fund-raising reunion I had a pleasant encounter with a woman who is a professional singer. I knew her as a young girl who shyly sang in the back of the chorus of a community Gilbert and Sullivan group I was in. She told me, at the reunion, that something I said to her at that time gave her the courage to pursue her love of singing. I wish I could remember the “noble song” that I recited over thirty five years ago. But it seemed to have up lifted her.

Let the words of my mouth . . . create

Our tradition tells us that God spoke everything into existence: “God said ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.” And . . . well, you know the rest of the story. Consider also James’ words on creating from today’s epistle: “In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth.”

Your voice, too, can be creative. You can “give birth” to friendships, or good times. Your words can be the midwife to an inviting community. Haven’t we heard time and again folks saying that “St. George’s is such good people.” Some were just passing through, but others stayed for years. Our words of invitation birthed such a community.

Let the words of my mouth . . . not harm

But, (and there is always a “but”) James also gives us a warning: “be quick to listen and slow to speak.” And also this: “If any think they are religious (and here you can drop in any adjective you choose—clever, right, in charge) and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion (or cleverness, rightness, in chargeness) is worthless.”

In debating societies, or in groups that train negotiators and leaders, this idea is reflected in the dictum: First gather intelligence; only then give your informed response. Wise words we can all heed because we might regret what our hasty words may do! Especially in times of heated passions, strong feelings, and ossified convictions.

At the heart of all this are these words from Mark’s Jesus: “but the things that come out are what defile. For it is from within, from the human heart that evil intentions come . . . All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”

As I thought about Jesus’ words this image came to my mind. In our anatomy the lungs provide the air for our voice and they also cradle (and I use that word on purpose) our heart. That intimate connection of heart and lungs invites, for me, this metaphorical image:

The heart is the traditional seat of our emotions, of our beliefs, of who we are. And in a heartbeat it pours all this directly into our lungs which in a single breath puffs out of our mouth as our voice—what is in our hearts spills out of our mouth

without much thought.

What you say and how you say it does matter. That old playground saying “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” just gets it so wrong. Words can hurt and can do lasting damage.

Gene Rainer gave me the gift of a short poem which fits in here so well:

Why Bother?

By Sean Thomas Dougherty

“Because right now

There is someone out there

With a wound

In the exact shape of your words.”

Words we keep repeating over and over come to affect and even direct what we come to believe and who we come to be. I pray that the words I repeat will be positive, helpful, and loving.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight,

Oh Lord, my strength and my redeemer.

Amen