

Sermon

Proper 18, Mark 7:24-37

September 6, 2015

“Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other.”

Psalm 85:10

Have you ever said something that you later regretted? If you are over two years old and especially if you are a spouse or a parent, you have probably had that experience. I know I have. One of my personality traits is having a quick wit. That often serves me well—I am able to give insight into a situation and make people laugh. I usually like that trait and it often serves a good purpose. But sometimes-- often when I am annoyed or angry or simply unthinking-- I have said something that has hurt someone to the core. And I regret that.

Words are powerful and they can be hurtful and even dangerous. In our epistle reading for next Sunday, we will hear that not many of us should become teachers in the church because of that power and the accountability we will face before God based on how we have used our words in the service of God. Those verses will make you pay attention if you get upfront and do what people like me do—speak to people about God and what’s right.

Because we all fall short. We say things that are off base that can hurt people in different ways. Thankfully, the people who hear us can often overcome what we say that is wrong or at least not helpful. That appears to be what happened in the first part of the Gospel we heard read today, the story of Jesus and the Syrophenician woman.

This is a fairly well known Gospel story, perhaps especially because it is out of character with how most of us see Jesus. We think of Jesus as always filled with **compassion** toward people in need. Jesus heals people, casts out demons, miraculously provides abundant food, and reaches out to outcasts like lepers and sinners. *That* is Jesus.

Jesus does have another side—he tells people in power, especially religious leaders, the **truth**. That is a dangerous thing to do, because powerful people like to control the message around them so they can control the people they lead. Jesus spoke up about religious rules like the Sabbath being secondary to caring for people in need. He openly celebrated with people the religious leaders did not approve of. Jesus became angry with those leaders when their religion was clearly more important to them than compassion for hurting people.

So those are two central aspects of who Jesus was and is—compassionate to those in need and speaking the truth to the powerful. Yet in this story about the Syrophenician woman, it seems Jesus reversed these qualities—he seemed to fuss at a woman whose child

was in need. Many interpreters have struggled with this story. I have heard many ingenious explanations for why he did this, such as Jesus was testing her or testing his followers. Frankly none of them satisfy me.

Some feminist theologians point to this story as part of Jesus' evolution as a person of faith in which he grew beyond the restriction of the culture into which he was born. His first century Jewish culture had rules about women and Gentiles and how they should approach a Jewish rabbi. And this woman had violated those rules, the type of rules that Jesus had challenged in other settings; but not this time. That interpretation seems closer to the truth.

However we interpret this story, a few things do stand out—first, Jesus spoke harsh words in that moment. For whatever reason, he was not initially compassionate. One possible explanation is that the woman was a rich, local Gentile woman who was part of a class and ethnic group that oppressed the local Jewish people. Even if that was true, she was also a mother with a sick child; and Jesus rebuked her as she pleaded to him for help.

Second, this woman had great faith despite her desperate situation. Her faith included tough skin and a sharp wit. When Jesus said what he said, she did not cower or walk away in anger or despair. She hung in there and engaged Jesus-- the person with power in this case-- in a way that probably surprised him and those around him. Her response of humility and humor held up a mirror to Jesus so that he could see in himself what he so often pointed out in others. And though we do not have described for us Jesus' expression or tone of voice, I believe Jesus was brought up short, nodded his head, and gave her the blessing she sought for her daughter.

So even with our Lord in this difficult and challenging story, we see the power of words. We also find hope, that even when our words fall short, when our words do harm, there is a way forward for both parties that can bring healing and new life.

We can think of this in our personal lives and in important relationships. When I have said hurtful things, the best response to me in order for me to change is usually honest and immediate feedback. Sometimes this is done with raw emotions—I see the hurt I have caused. Sometimes it is with humor, like this woman did with Jesus. When my stupid words are repeated back to me, I can see the error of what I said. On a good day and with God's grace, I can repent; if not right then, hopefully soon. Because words are powerful. Words matter.

We find this especially in our public discourse today. Words are built up and used for rhetorical effect without always thinking through consequences. We heard this when a celebrity politician announced his campaign for president and said that the immigrants being "sent" to us are mainly drug dealers and rapists. This is demonstrably untrue and without compassion about their real stories in which many are fleeing horrible circumstances in their home country and come here with hope for safety and a better life. Words are powerful.

We have found this in the Black Lives Matter campaign. Some of the intensity of the rhetoric and mutual misunderstanding could be cleared up by adding one word—“Black Lives Matter, Too.” The point of their protest is to point out how the system has too often failed black folks historically and today so that it seems that black lives do not matter. This is a legitimate area of protest, but in today’s world the rhetoric on both sides seems to be escalating in a way that is losing that original point. Some even allege that the protest is leading to increased violence against police. Any such violence is morally repugnant and obviously not the way to bring justice and reform to our legal system. Words are powerful.

So in our personal relationships and our public discourse, here are two good questions:

Are the words I am saying (or hearing) true?

And are they compassionate?

Or as our mothers may have taught us—is what we are about to say helpful? And is it necessary? Because if the words we say do not fulfill both of these standards, then silence is still a perfectly good option. I try to remember that myself.

That is what Jesus may have learned in this story. It is definitely what the story can teach us. Compassion and truth are two central and needed parts of God’s plan for our common life. If we cling to only one or the other part of what God intends, truth or compassion—or worse, ignore both—then we are missing out on how we can be part of God’s healing for the world.

So for example, speaking the truth to someone—an addict, a misguided political leader, a spouse, or a parent—may be needed for their healing and ours. Think of it as lancing a boil that has been allowed to fester and that is poisoning the person who has it and also contaminating their relationship with others and even the broader community. Confronting what they have said, what they believe, and how they behave gives them the chance to repent and be part of God’s healing for the world instead of part of the illness.

And at other times, we do not need to lead with truth. So for example, Jesus may have been technically correct with this Gentile woman, at least according to his beliefs (or he may have simply been tired). But regardless, what she really needed was for Jesus to reach into his wealth of compassion and share it with her by healing her little girl. So for us, there are times when truth telling—or telling what we think is the truth—may need to wait. Instead we may need to show compassion and help people who are desperate before we start to fuss at them.

Words are powerful. They do matter. For all of us, I pray we bring these two simple rules to our common life and our personal and public conversations—Are these words true? Are they compassionate? Then let us pray and reflect about what we say and repent as needed. Amen.

