

Hold Your Tongue

Matthew 15:10-28

Stupid

Useless

Ignorant

Pain in the Neck

Just like I can't put the toothpaste back into the tube, neither can I take back the words that come from my mouth. No matter the number of apologies, the words are not forgotten.

Our words are strong. They can be uplifting, inspiring, nourishing. They can be supportive and guiding. They can be loving, helpful, and positive, encouraging, and healing.

But all too often, our words can be filled with poison. They can be hurtful, destructive, demeaning; they can be self-involved, manipulating, and filled with lies, exaggeration, gossip and deceit.

A few days ago, at work, I had a woman on the phone that was unexplainably angry with whatever came out of my mouth. She wanted to know who was last at her house servicing her sewer, but she didn't want to waste her time waiting for me to look it up.

She wanted me to guarantee we could come out before noon, but if we couldn't be done by 10 a.m., then that would take up more of her time than she wanted. She wanted me to guarantee we could come out between 3 and 6 instead, but then she said she guessed she had absolutely nothing better to do with her time than spend all day at home waiting for us, so she supposed that was what she would have to do. After hanging up with her, I had a few PG rated words to say about her ... to myself.

Verses 18 and 19 from today's Gospel passage say: *But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.*

So what does God say about the words we use ... or even the ones we think?

We are to ask ourselves, Is what I am about to say true? Is it necessary? Is it kind? If it doesn't pass this test, keep it to yourself – Hold your tongue.

The uncontrolled tongue can do irreparable damage. If anyone had heard even the PG words I used, and most of you know that even PG might be a stretch for things I may have said ... if you had heard those words, you may have formed a different opinion of me.

Satan uses our tongue to divide us, to pull us apart, to pit us against each other. To allow no healing to exist.

No matter what you believe about what's going on in the world today, no matter who you blame or who you have forgiven ... no matter what you think about people who are different than you, who think differently than you do, know that that when we allow our tongues to be controlled by Satan, the world is torn apart.

Families are divided. Congregations are split. Community is broken. People are being killed over someone's use of their freedom of speech.

Do I believe in our freedom of speech? Absolutely! It's one of the rights we cherish as Americans. Am I concerned about the repercussions to many because of the lack of responsibility of a few when using their freedom of speech? Yes.

Is it true? Is it necessary? Is it kind?

We have to use our freedoms wisely. Insults, slander, racist remarks, evil words, do nothing to build bridges of communication or to help others.

Our own words need to be a true example of the person Jesus Christ has shown us how to be.

We all are sinners in God's eyes, but because of God's love for us, Jesus went to the cross to die for our sins. Could, I, as a Christian, say that only some "deserve" God's forgiveness and grace? No! Hold that thought!

In the past, I had a hard time understanding the second part of today's Gospel. I easily understood that it isn't the food we eat, kosher or not, raw or cooked, cud-chewer or not, tasty to some and disgusting to others ... that defiles us ... and this statement angered the Pharisees who were listening to Jesus. Instead, Jesus said that it is what comes out of our mouths that defiles us.

But the words that Jesus uses on the Canaanite woman confused me. He has just finished saying that what comes from the mouth also comes from the heart and sometimes what comes from the heart are evil intentions. He says that what comes from the heart is of most importance.

The Canaanite woman comes forward and begs Jesus to have mercy on her and her daughter who is tormented by a demon – to please free her daughter. First, Jesus is silent, He ignores her.

The disciples want Jesus to send her away – she was bothering them. They don't seem to have any compassion or sensitivity to what this woman needs. And Jesus, He finally says: *"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."*

The woman kneels before him and begs for help and worse words come out of Jesus' mouth: *"It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."*

Jesus refers to this woman with an ethnic slur – He calls her a "dog"; it is not a nice little image of a cute puppy begging at the table, but more like what many have experienced by cruel words thrown out at them. What has "come out" of Jesus' mouth is ugly, nasty, mean-spirited and discriminatory.

For anyone who didn't realize that there must be a lesson about to be taught ... all we would see is that Jesus is being some kind of a jerk. There seems to be a disconnect between what Jesus has just been teaching His disciples and how he's acting now! There's a disconnect between who we have been taught Jesus is and the Jesus on display!

It was Jesus who led His disciples into Tyre and Sidon ... a land full of Gentiles. When Jesus sent his followers out on their first mission – these were the people He told them to avoid! He's crossed a boundary He had set himself. Jewish law said that they weren't to be associating with people of this woman's kind.

The laws were meant to preserve and protect God's people. The Israelites had proven themselves to be really bad at staying true to God. Read the Old Testament and you will find so many stories about how easily tempted they were by the people around them ... how easily they assimilated with these other cultures and the worship of their gods. Our Father God was guarding them against themselves.

So, what's going on here? Jesus is crossing a cultural boundary, doing what those who came before His birth had done. And then it almost seems like Jesus has realized that what He's done is wrong. He shouldn't have gone in this direction. He's reacting cruelly to this woman because of the poor choice he made ...

But then we can look back to the beginning of this passage. Jesus says ... *"Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."* Then the disciples approached and said to him, *"Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?"* He answered, *"Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit."*

He says that the Pharisees have gotten it all wrong – they are blind to what God means. What we put into our mouths can be constantly changing ... but what sticks inside of us, what takes root in our hearts – that is what will measure who we truly are. It's not about some legal hypocrisy, but instead about true morality, kindness, love and compassion. Don't pledge allegiance to God's law while ignoring God's will.

Following God's law kept the Israelites separated from things they were to avoid, but instead of reminding the Jews of their weaknesses and how easily they fell into sin without staying close to God ... following the law seemed to give them a sense of superiority.

So, here again we have Jesus, appearing to follow the written law, but looking more like a jerk. For me, it seems that Jesus is telling us that we need to understand the true message God is teaching us.

“Stay away from the Gentiles who will tempt you to follow their gods...”

What I hear ... “Guard yourself from those who would tempt you to see the world’s evilness as good, those who would tempt you to spend time in filth rather than in faith, who would tempt you to accept lies over truth.”

God’s salvation, God’s love, God’s gifts have no ethnic, cultural or financial boundaries. God’s grace is offered to all who believe, not just those who look like us.

The Canaanite woman tells Jesus, “*Even the dogs eat the crumbs from their masters’ table.*” And Jesus replies, “*Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.*” And her daughter was healed from that moment.

Jesus’ call went beyond the sheep of Israel. This is the perfect image of God’s will! He took the shame upon Himself – willingly became the “jerk,” the “bad guy” so that His disciples could fully see what He has been talking about!

“*Listen and understand!!!*” What would our world look like if we spent more time listening and understanding to God’s Word and even the words of those around us, rather than acting out or speaking without thought?

We would more readily understand the situation of another person. Where they are coming from, why they are feeling angry, what their struggles are.

A few years ago, Toby and I were driving along and someone didn’t respond on the road the way we felt they should. I can’t remember if it was on Military Road where the four lanes cross Niagara Falls Blvd and turn right away into two lanes, or maybe it was on a highway, or maybe they were going too slow while looking for a parking lot they needed to turn into ... I don’t know. But, the other driver didn’t do what we wanted them to do. Toby was upset and I said, “He’s probably a tourist and just doesn’t know.” Now, whenever someone drives in a way we don’t think they should, we say ... “He’s probably a tourist.”

Sometimes there’s still a little anger, or head shaking ... but I like to think we give the other driver grace now. We try to hold our tongue!

Listen and understand! I’m sure there’s times that you can remember pausing, listening, trying to understand a person or a situation. And there’s probably been more times than you’d like to remember when you’ve experienced the opposite. When no one would listen to you, or you wouldn’t stop to listen or understand someone else, causing a misunderstanding that was avoidable if only listening had happened first. Just hold your tongue for a moment!

This passage reminds us that we can be so pre-occupied with spiritual matters – like the disciples who wanted to listen to Jesus instead of helping this woman ... that we miss the needs all around us – right at our doorsteps, the needs of those who might be sitting to our right or our left, the needs of those who make us uncomfortable because they are not like us, because they are needy, because they are homeless, they might ask for help.

No matter whether we like this passage, or understand it or we feel called out ... Jesus has provided a way for the woman to be an example of a gentle tongue.

The woman is ignored. She is told she is nothing better than a “dog.” And yet, the woman doesn’t yell, she doesn’t wish evil upon Jesus, she doesn’t try to make Jesus look bad ... instead, she speaks politely and is rewarded because of her “*great faith.*”

I believe that Jesus always intended to help the woman and her daughter, but used this opportunity to show the poor attitude of the Jews in comparison to His compassion – a compassion we all need to have.

We have to be careful of what we say, we can’t take the words back once they are spoken. Apologies only go so far and scars remain. We may all know this.

A few words, said in anger, can destroy a relationship that has taken years to develop. We can hurt a friend and lose them forever.

Before we open our mouths to speak, we must remember the power of our tongues, we must remember that our words are like fire. They can warm the hearts of others or they can destroy lives.

The wonderful thing about growing in our Christianity, about not being stagnant in these bodies, is that we get stronger and stronger as we turn to the Holy Spirit to help us become the people God wants us to be. The Holy Spirit can give us the power to control the poison that drips from our tongues, giving us self-control and helping us choose the right words to use when we don't have the ability to choose those words ourselves.

Are my words true, necessary and kind? Are they honest, yet humble; not intentionally hurtful?

Think before you speak! Just because you feel the need to speak the honest truth, doesn't mean you need to hurt someone while saying it.

To simplify it, suggesting that someone might enjoy this great grilled cheese sandwich is so much kinder than saying, "Would you please stop eating garlic and onion sandwiches for lunch? Your breath is horrid!"

Remember your parents telling you, "If you can't say something nice, don't say anything at all"?

Don't be sharing the sins of another when you could and should be helping them. We have to guarantee that what we say actually helps the situation.

It's easy to look for the negative, but we are to use God's wisdom to build up, to look for a positive solution, to guide people back to God's narrow path.

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me" – I bet you remember that one, right? Do you still believe it? I don't. Have you heard anyone say something unkind to you or about you? Did they call you stupid, or slow, or did they say that your ideas weren't of any use? Did it hurt? Even just a little bit? We have to remember that our words are powerful and they can devastate another person.

When an adult speaks harshly to a child, a child's excitement, creativity, passion can be destroyed. Telling a child she is stupid, that his ideas are impossible; one word said in anger or haste can forever change a child as the light of joy leaves their eyes.

We have to remember that we are always being observed. By children, by other Christians, by non-Christians, by searchers, by others in the community – how can our words be uplifting one moment and destructive the next? Are we not aware that others wait for our mistakes?

Have you ever thought a friend had left the house, and then laughed at an idea she came up with or commented rudely on his haircut, to then find out they hadn't left? We must always speak as if others are in the room with us.

In everything you do, exemplify Jesus' compassion and love.

Now if I could just figure out how to put this toothpaste back in the tube, Toby won't call me out for wasting it!