

CHRIST THE LORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH      Pinole CA

The Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost

August 16, 2020

*“WORDS”*

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Good Morning everyone. It has sure been hot, yet only a week ago it was chilly in the morning with a cool breeze that lasted all day. And what about last night? If there was any doubt about the power of God, well I couldn't help reflecting on it as the lightning lit up the sky. Welcome to California weather. Glad you're here and safe.

As I read the Gospel for today, I felt it was good timing. As we near our country's election, we are dealing with the coronavirus and its fallout, and last, but definitely not least, the change that is beginning to take place in America. If we heed Jesus today, we can be part of that change. It is particularly important to understand how our words affect our world.

Jesus tells us that whatever your body eats, whether good (and you digest it) or bad (and it comes out of your body sooner than later), it is temporary. Your food produces waste, no matter whether you eat yesterday's leftovers or Communion Bread.

What does matter is what comes out of your mouth. Science has studied how the brain, words, emotions, and thoughts intertwine to create the world we live in on a personal level, but also on a communal level.

I talk about words because when I was young, what was taught to me was that each group had its own markings. As “Archie Bunker” was the TV hit, civil unrest was present, and Vietnam raged on, I became a teen listening to phrases using the “N” word, as well as multiple slang words for different Asian cultures, and remarks on women that went from calling them a “B” to a “Ho.” I realized these words made us more divided than united.

Comedians used slang and were continually projecting demeaning scenarios as needed to get a laugh. But what were we doing? We were producing division, we were laughing at the expense of others. I think everyone in the world has been on the end of a remark that was based on a slur that hurt, or made one question one’s worth, and left you wondering why your way was considered “different” or maybe even wrong by another person who had their own burdens to carry. What of marital relations that throw angry slurs at each other - does this bring harmony?

Over the years many of us have let those phrases go. We use respectful words, we recognize someone’s educational title such as “doctor”, “reverend”, or “professor”. We use the word “person” when being gender free, such as mail person or police person. We try to recognize people the way they want to be recognized. Hopefully, especially this year with all the Black Lives Matter movements and the rise of outright racism, you are re-educating yourself with a more complete view of history that includes those voices who up until now were never heard. Are you reworking your words?

What comes out of your mouth matters. We have to stop hurting each other; we have to be aware that our words and thoughts create our lives and our society. At present we have created a divided country that constantly throws ugly words

around at each other. If I belittle another enough times, over time, I will begin to believe those thoughts. And even more damaging - the person those remarks were aimed at may also start to believe them and this can render sad circumstances.

If your heart reflects your intentions, as Jesus teaches, then our words need to come from a place of one who has experienced God's grace, love, and mercy. We need to see the image of God in the other. Words can seem so little, but they can create so much.

Some of us have to learn new ways to express ourselves; some of us need to embrace the change that is coming knowing we all make mistakes. But not only do we have to change our own words and thoughts, we need to change our hearts so we are able to challenge others when we hear something that makes another person feel "less than". In our personal relationships we may need to stop and take a breath before a hurtful word comes out. As you know we can never really call them back.

As we continue to head into more political and economic struggles, words will be flying and accusations will be stated (some credible, others not). We need to discern with our hearts, we need to be aware of the words we hear and believe.

The phrase "fake it till you make it" comes to mind as I first became aware of the implications of words. Replacing gender stereotypes, referring to professional women by their title, searching for new words for God himself – rather than the typical male pronouns, all take time to learn and practice.

A long time ago in a galaxy far away, I, the young chaplain intern, entered the hospital room of an elderly Asian lady. I introduced myself and she fixed her hearing aid, and then asked me to turn around for a moment.

I respected her and turned my back to her. After a moment she told me I could turn back toward her. When I looked at her this time, I saw that she had put on really bright red lipstick, and although I give her credit for the try, she had missed the mark, so to say, and her smile was a bit crooked and messy when she grinned.

She admitted she was lonely and had been in the hospital longer than she expected, but soon would be discharged to rehab and then go back to her family. She asked me how she looked; did she look sick? She worried about what her family would say to her if she wasn't up to snuff. I smiled and stated she looked beautiful. She then invited me to look at some old family photos that her relatives had placed in a book and left with her.

As she described each photo she glowed with pride at how attractive and smart she had been. She showed me pictures of her college graduation at a time when women didn't often have the opportunity to go to college, never mentioning the struggle an Asian female would endure at school. When she was done with the pictures, she began to cry.

I asked her what was wrong and she explained that over the years her family had used her to watch the grandchildren, cook family meals, shop, clean, and do all the things their busy lives didn't have time for. She loved to do these things, and at first she garnered compliments and thank-you's. But over the years her children began to tell her she looked tired. Then some of her lady friends would go to lunch

and talk about their lives and she began to be referred to as the “old” one of the group, the one who used to be pretty, used to be smart, but she was just a granny now.

She looked up at me and said, “but I am the same lady, at least inside. Yes? I gave up a career and took care of everyone, yet they criticize, they question me, and now they don’t have time for me.”

Words, words, words. She continued to explain she had lived with racial slurs being cast at her in the park when she strolled with the children. When she drove her car, her Asian heritage would come up as other drivers criticized her parking. And her family never had time for kind words; they were always busy, and now her inner voice was beginning to mock her as well.

It was words that hurt her, almost as strong as physical abuse. So I used my words. I told her I thought her lipstick was lovely and that she looked young for her age. I told her that the care she took of her family was seen by God and done with pure intent. I reminded her she was created in the image of God and God understands her struggle and is proud of her. I told her that going to college back in her time was courageous, and told her she was wise and had worth. I used words to begin the long journey of healing her self-worth.

Our Gospel today asks us not to be blind to our intentions and our words, because although they seem simple on the surface, the words we hear, use regularly, and roll around in our heads, shape our thoughts and how we perceive the world around us. Say something enough times and you can believe it. Hear something said to you many times, even if untrue, and you begin to question your own truth.

Just as they say, you are what you eat, you become what you think and say. Jesus is calling us to elevate our vocabulary, elevate our intentions to bring more compassion than harm into our lives. And this is something we need right now. Use our words to bring unity rather than division, to build up rather than break down. Be kind.

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer. AMEN