

Race and Language
Isaiah 50: 4-9; James 3:1-12
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Rev. Dr. Charles Parker

I. Introduction

A couple of weeks ago at the Republican presidential debates in Cleveland, Donald Trump was speaking and he said, "The big problem that this country has is being politically correct. I frankly don't have time for total political correctness, and to be honest with you, this country doesn't have time either. This country is in big trouble. We don't win anymore."

The term "political correctness" is a pejorative, one that is meant to imply an unhealthy focus on our carefulness around our language, our use of language judiciously, and in ways that are intended not to offend. And it's an issue that we've had a lot of public and national debate around over the course of the last year. And so, as we as a congregation engage in some reflections on race, I thought this would be a helpful topic for us to unpack. We had been asked by the Council of Bishops of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, by our National United Methodist Women, by our President, and a host of voices to engage with some intentionality in some dialogue about race and how we can work to build a stronger sense of a healthy community as a nation.

Throughout this month we're going to be using our lectionary texts, which are the texts that have been laid out by the church for this particular Sunday in the year, as a jumping-off place for these reflections and this wonderful passage from James as our epistle lesson that speaks very powerfully to this issue.

II. Words have power

It's a text that frankly Mr. Trump might have benefited from looking at before he started talking about political correctness, because James has a very powerful appreciation for how powerful our language can be. He uses these images of a horse with a bit or a ship with a rudder to talk about the fact that while the tongue is a small organ and it is easy to dismiss the words that we speak as unimportant; they, in fact, have profound import. And the image of the bit in the horse's mouth is that a very tiny, little piece of metal controls which way this huge powerful animal moves. And likewise, a rudder, a relatively small piece of equipment on the ship determines how the massive ship moves through the water. And James's point is that not only does our language share with others what our beliefs are, but our language also actually shapes our beliefs. Our language shapes how we understand the world and we need to pay close attention to that; that the people of God are scriptural witnesses about the power of words is quite compelling.

And you all remember at the beginning of Genesis, God calls all of creation into being by speaking the right word. Jesus throughout his ministry is always healing people simply by speaking a word to them -- we saw that in our passage last week. And the Gospel of John, of course, helps us understand that Jesus himself is the incarnate Word of God, words according to our scriptural witness, have immense unspeakable power.

Language shapes how we understand our reality, so that if I talk about God in purely male language I'm going to start understanding God to be a man, and God's not a man. That's why we bring some intentionality to how we talk about God. When we refer to the Hebrew Scriptures as the Old Testament, we imply that that is no longer a critical witness for us and we then discount some of the power of the Hebrew Scriptures informing our faith. When you see the Ark of the Covenant up here on our altar because Temple Micah will be worshipping the High Holy Days here in our sanctuary, but when we say to our Jewish brothers and sisters the "Old Testament," what we have said essentially is "your witness is not as important as ours."

How we use language shapes how we understand the world and how we talk about race in our country has a profound impact on how we relate to one another. And we've got a history and sometimes a fairly tortured history of how we use language around race in our country. And I'm not just talking about clearly racist language or racial epithets. I'm talking about all of the very subtle ways in which our language betrays our biases. And James's admonition to us is we've got to pay attention to those things because they matter. They matter with how we're heard by people of different ethnicities. They matter to us because they shape how we view the world. Let me give you a couple of examples.

Shortly after Ferguson erupted last year, one of the slogans that developed very quickly was the phrase "Black Lives Matter," and that's why I have this on the cover of our bulletin today. And I have it on the cover of the bulletin particularly because there's been a lot of interesting dialogue around that. When we were talking about our banners, my friend Kate Murphey pushed me to put "Black Lives Matter" out on our banner frames. And to my embarrassment, I will tell you, I allowed other voices in our congregation to persuade me that "Black Lives Matter" was too aggressive and too divisive, and that a better phrase might be "All Lives Matter," which is what we did. As I have spent more time with this and have been instructed by wiser heads than my own, I've started to realize the error in that. And I want to read just a brief passage from an essay that was very helpful to me in this and it was well-written so I'm just going to read the language as I read it. The writer of this essay says, "Imagine that you're sitting down to dinner with your family, and while everyone else gets a serving of the meal, you don't get any. So you say, 'I should get my fair share.' And as a direct response to this, your dad corrects you, saying, 'everyone should get their fair share.' Well, that's a wonderful sentiment — and indeed, everyone should, and that was kind of your point in the first place, that you should be a part of everyone, and you should get your fair share *also*. However, your dad's smart comment just dismissed

you and didn't solve the problem that you still haven't got any food. The problem is that the statement 'I should get my fair share' had an implicit 'too' at the end, 'I should get my fair share, too, just like everyone else.' But your dad's response treated your statement as though you meant '*only* I should get my fair share.' which clearly was not your intention. As a result, his statement that 'everyone should get their fair share,' while true, only served to ignore the problem you were trying to point out."

To say that black lives matter is not to say that other lives don't matter. It is not to deny that all lives are of infinite value in God's sight. It is to say that in a year when we have seen one after another young African American man get killed we are not living as though all lives matter, and we need to be able to articulate that black lives matter, too.

So, if I were a person of color, if I were an African American driving along the street and I see a banner that says "All Lives Matter," what I hear is here is a group of people who don't quite get it. Maybe well intended but who have missed the point of the whole dialogue.

Let me give you another example. After the Charleston shootings and, in fact, through much of the year, there's been some very interesting dialogue about how the media talks about murderers and particularly about how the language describing killers who are people of color is very different than the language that describes killers who are white. So, I read this title to an article recently that says -- this is a direct quote -- "*Charleston Shooting: Black and Muslim Killers are Terrorists and Thugs; Why are White Shooters called Mentally Ill?*" Well, I find that a very convicting statement. And what you see in the language there, of course, is that as soon as we start talking about terrorists, we start talking about a class of people of whom we are afraid and we have lumped people into this class of "other" that cause us fear, whereas when we talk about somebody who is mentally ill, that's an aberration. So, despite the fact that virtually every mass murderer in the history of our country is a white man, we talk about those folks as aberrations, but when a Muslim or an African American man kills somebody, they're criminals or thugs or terrorists.

Now, there was another really interesting insight about this particular article I wanted to point out, and some of you may have noticed it. Here is an article whose purpose is to highlight the different ways we talk about killers in our country. But listen to the language of the article. It talks about white people, even in the title, as "shooters," and black and Muslim people as "killers." Did you notice that? So, this is a really interesting phenomenon, isn't it? Here is an article whose whole purpose is to sensitize us to language and the author falls into the same trap himself. Because "shooter" is a much more morally neutral word than "killer." People shoot for all kinds of reasons, including sport and hunting. So, even as we try to sensitize ourselves to the issue, we fall into ways of expressing ourselves that betray our own biases.

III. Careful words (from James)

So, James provides us with some very helpful guidance on how to move forward as we increasingly sensitize ourselves to the way that we use language. The first thing that James tells us is that awareness brings responsibility. If you use language that is harmful through ignorance, that's unfortunate. To use it harmfully because we can't be bothered to pay close attention is a moral failing. Which is why as we become aware of our language used, to not have the luxury of being able to be dismissive of being politically correct. Our language has power and as we understand it better, we have an absolute responsibility to use our words with more and more carefulness.

In that beautiful passage from Isaiah that we just heard read, the prophet says "Lord, the Eternal, equipped me for this job -- with skilled speech, a smooth tongue for instruction. So, that I can find the words that comfort and soothe the downtrodden, tired, and despairing." As we gain an awareness of how our language impacts those around us and ourselves, we have a greater and greater responsibility to be careful about it.

The second thing that James says that I find enormously helpful and emotionally freeing is he starts off just saying we're all going to fail at this. We are all going to trip up at some point in our language use, and that's okay because we're not perfect. We are on the road to perfection, as John Wesley invited us, but we are going to trip up and that's okay. We don't get angry. We don't despair. We learn and we keep moving.

A couple of years ago, I was preaching to the conference staff up at our conference center, and I don't even remember what the sermon was about but I remember that I used a quote from Dr. King in the sermon. And as I was preaching, I introduced the quote by saying it was a quote from MLK. And a very dear friend of mine, an African American pastor, came up to me after the sermon and said, "Gee, Charlie, that was a great sermon. If I could make one small suggestion, you referred to Dr. King as MLK and that felt to me dismissive." Now that had obviously not been my intention. I wasn't trying to be dismissive or hurtful and clearly I was using the quote because it was a powerful quote. But I wasn't watching that piece of my language carefully or was unaware and Malcolm saying to me, "Hey, Charlie, here is something I heard," was hugely helpful to me in understanding how I came across. It wasn't a big issue, he wasn't aggressive or antagonistic. I am so grateful for those moments when friends and colleagues have said, "Let me tell you what I heard when you said X." Because we're going to trip up. That's just who we are. So, you know what, you learn, you incorporate. I never say MLK when I'm quoting Dr. King anymore. Because I learn. I'm a slow-learner but I learn(!)

And obviously this is hard stuff. It's hard too because sometimes the term of preference has shifted from one year to the next or one generation to the next, which requires that we keep updating our language. Sometimes language is heard very differently in different contexts. So, in a lot of contexts for example you can use the term "Latino" or "Hispanic" almost interchangeably. In other contexts, one of those two terms is preferable. So, there is an ongoing process of becoming sensitized and

listening to the people that you're in dialogue with so you can hear back reflected what they are hearing from you.

The third thing that James points out is that this powerful instrument of the tongue can say things that are powerful and up-building and wondrous one moment and things that are undermining and destructive the next. And part of our process is an ongoing one of learning muscle memory with our language.

So, for example, when I started at Wesley Seminary a hundred years ago, they demanded that every paper I write use gender neutral language for God. Well, you know what, that was hard. That was hard for me. I wasn't used to it. It sounded awkward. It sounded stilted and fake. But you know what, you get practice, you learn it, you develop the muscle memory, so that at this point if I go into a church and I hear somebody praying, "Father God this," "Father God that," it feels really awkward to me because my ear has been tuned a little bit better on that particular issue. So part of what we're invited to do is to continue the process of muscle memory, of practicing our language and becoming ever more aware so that we can speak and be heard in the ways that we intend.

IV. Conclusion

Years and years ago, when I was growing up, my parents told me, as I suspect many of your parents told you, that sticks and bones may break my bones but names can never hurt me. Does that sound familiar? And they told me that because that was a defense tool. If you're grown up in school and someone says something mean and asked you to just let that roll off your back because names can never hurt you. You know what, that was wrong. I understand why they said it. I'm even maybe grateful that they said it because I probably needed some protection, but it is a fact it was wrong.

Names hurt, or they can. The language we use intentionally and unintentionally has very profound impact on those around us and on ourselves. And what James invites us to do is to enter into an ongoing journey of perfecting ourselves, of perfecting our language so that the people around us who look different than we do hear us in a way that is inviting and up-building and so that we develop a healthier and healthier understanding about what it means to be a multi-cultural, multi-racial family of God. We do not have the luxury of being able to ignore the impact of the words that we use, but as we engage in this journey we open ourselves up to the powerful formation of the Holy Spirit that seeks to have each of us be honored and to honor all people as sacred children of God.

Amen.