

Sermon: Epiphany II

The Rev. Mike Wernick

January 18, 2015

Year B

1 Samuel 3:1-10

Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

John 1:43-51

Sticks and stones can break my bones... but words can never hurt me... I grew up with this saying... with this urban myth that some parents instill in their kids to toughen them up... to keep them from running home any time someone on the playground throws a mean look their way... or utters an unkind word... but there *were* words that hurt me... anti-Semitic words... homophobic words... cupcake words...

Of course... we can bring some *baggage* to our hearing... Baggage which creates *too much* sensitivity may not serve us well... or we can erect emotional walls which prevent most words from even getting through to us...

But in the last two weeks... the world has had to deal with words... and their consequences... with words written in cartoons... we all know that Charlie Hebdo was an equal-opportunity offender... and in the conversations that have followed that horrific massacre... we've heard about free speech... and hate speech...

Hate speech is defined as "speech intended to degrade, intimidate, or incite violence or prejudicial action against someone based on race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, or disability."

When we truly don't intend any of these outcomes... we apologize and seek reconciliation... but those who committed this act *did* intend them...

My experience of what happened in the days which followed... was an unrealistic kind of disconnect... it found many people siding... almost vehemently... with the First

Amendment... or its counterpart in France... defending anyone's right to say anything... but without suffering any kind of negative consequence...

And then we have today's Epistle... the timing could almost not be better... Paul writes... *All things are lawful for me... but not all things are beneficial...* we might update it... I can say anything I want... but not everything I can say is beneficial... or loving... or uplifting... or compassionate... or reconciling...

And in the last few days... even Pope Francis said that there are limits to the freedom of speech... he affirmed that this is a fundamental human right... but added that he believes there should be limits to offending and ridiculing the faiths and beliefs of others... in an example... he said: "If my good friend Dr. Gasparri says a curse word against my mother... he can expect a punch!" and Francis pretended to throw a punch in his direction... I wonder if anyone made that into a cartoon...

As we commemorate Martin Luther King, Jr. tomorrow... we recall one of the most stirring things he said in his speech at the Lincoln Memorial... on August 28, 1963... he said:

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.

King believed the path to this dream must be through non-violence... he added:

Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights... of meeting physical force... with soul force.

Three years later in 1966... in an interview with Mike Wallace... despite a summer of violence... Dr. King continued to stress the path of non-violence... Race riots were taking place across the country... and rifts in the civil rights movement were widening...

militant leaders like Stokely Carmichael and his call for "black power" demanded that the movement part from Dr. King's *non-violent* Gospel. But in spite of that pressure... Dr. King would not budge... he told Mike Wallace:

I contend that the cry of "black power" is... at bottom... a reaction to the reluctance of white power... to make the kind of changes necessary... to make justice a reality for the Negro. I think we've got to see... that a riot is the language of the unheard...

Dr. King fought on... non-violently... for two more years... He was assassinated on April 4, 1968... the day after he gave his moving "Mountaintop" speech... in which he told a crowd in Memphis that he'd seen the "Promised Land" of a just country... but tragically predicted:

I may not get there with you... but I want you to know tonight that we... as a people... will get to the Promised Land.

African Americans... Africans stolen from their homelands... and sold into slavery... wanting to get to the Promised Land... wanting the same kind of freedoms that on every level... the Exodus... represents... for all of us...

Here in the west... it can be a real challenge... to understand all the factors that motivated the Hebdo attack... in some ways... the magazine represents the best and the worst of western society... the freedom to say whatever you want... and an insensitivity about how those words can hurt... Max Fisher wrote on vox.com: *French society is in the middle of what we in the United States would call a culture war. Though French colonialism ended in the 1950s and 1960s, France has absorbed a large number of immigrants... many of them Muslim... from former colonies in North and West Africa... and those immigrants and their descendants continue to face systemic discrimination...*

And the same kind of blind discrimination continues in this country... when black lives seem not to matter... and when lawmakers make it increasingly difficult for people of color to vote...

Our reading from 1 Samuel says: the word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread... and the lamp of God had not yet gone out... the lamp was probably a sanctuary lamp that lit the Tabernacle at night... but Eli was also the lamp of God... a living lamp... and his light was being passed on to Samuel... the text doesn't say how he felt when he realized he was being replaced... but he had the presence of mind to instruct Samuel on how to respond to God...

And Nathanael had probably never been there... but he asked: *Can anything good come out of Nazareth? ...*

The source of goodness about which Nathanael asked was not simple geography... but Philip knew how to respond too... he said *Come and see...*

Theologian John Shea suggests that Jesus recognizing Nathanael... and Nathanael recognizing Jesus... is the hearing and seeing of our heart... an internal re-cognition of a thin place where one encounters God... and the image of angels ascending and descending upon the Son of Man... recalls Jacobs's dream in Genesis 28... and him naming the place Bethel... the House of God... Shea quotes Thomas Merton who wrote:

“At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and by illusion... a point of pure truth... a point or spark which belongs entirely to God... which is never at our disposal... and which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind... or the brutalities of our own will... but it is the point from which God disposes of our lives... this little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God in us... it is his name written in us... as our dependence... and as our sonship... It is like a

pure diamond... blazing with the invisible light of heaven... it is in everybody... and if we could see it... we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely... I have no program for this seeing... he said... it is only given... but the Gate of Heaven is everywhere."

Is the Word of the LORD commonplace in our day... are visions widespread... if Nathanael asked whether anything good can come out of Nazareth... then we can... and must ask whether anything good can come out of satire... or anything... that encourages Islamophobia... anti-Semitism... homophobia... or that which marginalizes... and we must continue to address the sin of racism... which haunts our national consciousness... we need to ask how words can be *just like* sticks and stones... how they can cut like a knife... or perhaps wound like a bullet...

Billy Graham's son Franklin recently said that Islam is not a religion of Peace... that's like looking at the KKK and saying Christianity is not a religion of Peace either... and when statements like those are made... we dis-respect the dignity of millions based on what a few have done... yet there are those who hear and see the need for reconciliation... the Kaufman Institute here in Grand Rapids regularly hosts dialogues for those in the three Abrahamic faiths... I've been invited to speak at the Mid-Michigan Interfaith Dialogue Symposium in April... our work is not yet done...

Today's texts remind us to listen to God... instead of the voices of Empire... and to see the face of Christ in each other... to listen to all of our neighbors... And except maybe for Eli... all those in today's readings heard God calling to them... heard something familiar... something that resonated in them... and made their ears tingle... something calling them back to a home which exists in the Palace of Nowhere... maybe heard what the Prodigal Son heard... calling him back to a Father who forgives and welcomes and embraces...

Moses did not get to the geographic Promised Land... Martin Luther King knew he might not see the inner One fully realized... but we are called... as God called Samuel... over and over and over again... until we learn the proper response... "Speak Lord... for your servant is listening."

Mike+