

Sermon
St. Mary Nanoose Bay
August 20, 2017
Matthew 15:10-28

Since I was with you last Sunday, I've been to our cabin on a remote gulf island. By remote I mean, there's no ferry service there and there is no road, electricity or running water. We travel there in a well-used and trustworthy 16 foot aluminium boat.

Twenty years ago, we built a cabin on the property and, at the same time, our outhouse. Well, after 20 years, not to get too graphic, our outhouse was full and needed emptying. Two days ago, as I was crouched under the boards shovelling out the, well you know what, I thought, I can't believe I'm doing this! I could never tell anyone!

But you know, after reading the scripture for today, I realize there are far more difficult things to deal with than shovelling poop. That was easy. Well, relatively easy. My neck and shoulders were killing me that evening. But there was nothing emotional to deal with. Except for amazement. What I had been shovelling had turned into dirt. Just dirt. No smell. Nothing unsightly. It truly was a blessed miracle.

But the things in my life that have been really difficult to deal with haven't had anything to do with dirty diapers, dusty surfaces, unmatched pillow cases, or surprise guests. The difficult things in my life have occurred within my relationships. And specifically, what has been said within those relationships. The hurtful, thoughtless,

shaming things I've said, or the painful things that have been said to me.

Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me. I don't think so. It all hurts. And Jesus takes on in our gospel message today. He challenges us to put our attention on what truly matters in life. We worry looking good instead of acting with integrity.

For the people of his day, Jesus points to their adherence to the law. They are fixated on fulfilling the letter of the law; not the spirit. So in this instance, Jesus is challenging them about their fanatic obsession the law around what can or cannot be eaten, when and how. He tells them, "You're focusing on the wrong thing!" Of course the law is important, but not when it excludes what is at the core of that law. The spirit of "Love your God and your neighbour as yourself," is what the law is meant to serve. Not self-righteous, not judgment, not disconnection.

Yes, food gives life, and that's important. But, food is a gift. Receive it as such. What goes your mouth is from God; washing your hands before eating is a healthy practice and shows respect to the One who provides. But fanaticism around the practice deflects from what is important. What is important is to express gratitude for what is provided, to share it generously, to speak words that are gentle and aid digestion.

So it is that what comes out of your mouth that needs attention. It is the words you speak that should be where you focus, for that is

what is within your control. Does what comes out of your mouth suffuse the surroundings with gratitude? Does God's steadfast abundance soften your heart? Do your words contribute to life, encourage life, support life?

Are you generous like God? Are you forgiving like God? Are you patient and respectful?

Or are you judging? Critical? Blaming? Shaming? Sharp tongued? Does the daily meal become a place of conflict, power struggle, and distress?

The Nobel prize winning poet and Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hahn suggest the following: Before you speak, put your message to this test: Is what you are going to say **"True, Necessary, Kind"**? **"TNK"** (I think of 'tink before you speak').

When the disciples tell Jesus that his words have upset the pious Pharisees, Jesus' response seems in line with this test: He says, "If it's not from God, it will not last – 'it will be uprooted'."

What is from God is natural. It grows. It serves life. Natural processes can be trusted. Gandhi once said, "Don't confuse what's habitual with what's natural." It's natural for us to love others, to care about their well-being and to want the same in return.

But what we conjure up in our minds in terms of the stories we make up about others to justify our own behaviour is not natural. That behaviour does not align with God. It does not come from our hearts. We don't trust God, ourselves or others, and in our defensiveness, we attack others and keep them at a distance.

Another wise person, Don Miguel Ruiz, talks about the way we use language this way. He says, “The word is the most powerful tool we have. And like a two edged sword, it can be used to destroy or it can be used to create the most beautiful things.”

Yes, words are powerful. Yet we don’t learn how to communicate effectively in this culture. We bandy words around without much awareness. We are afraid of silence. We don’t take time to think before we speak. And the media uses words to promote the most obsessive consumerism the world has ever seen. This is not the use of words to support God’s presence in the world!

And interestingly, this is not the only story we hear today. There’s a second, but maybe not so separate, story that follows Jesus explaining to the disciples that it’s not what goes in the mouth but what comes out that defiles life and God.

In this next story a woman uses her words in a way that moves Jesus’ heart. Her appeal is direct from her need. Her love for daughter moves her to reach out and cross a cultural barrier even when her chances are slim. She is desperate and argues with Jesus that even those who are not of the house of Israel - the Jews - are in need of mercy. Her clarity, her integrity, and her need speak to Jesus and he acknowledges “Woman, great is your faith!” and her daughter was healed instantly. Interesting words. Not, “he healed her daughter,” but, “her daughter was healed instantly.” Now this is something to ponder. That faith and healing are somehow connected. But that’s a reflection for another day.

When Jim and I were on the Camino and had arrived in Santiago, Spain, the destination of the Camino, we stuck around that intriguing old city for 3 days and found ourselves drawn to the Cathedral twice a day. In the mornings we attended the English Pilgrims' Mass. The same priest presided each day. He was Father Juan from Venezuela. His English was understandable but not especially fluent so his homilies were brief and to the point. And wonderful, I might add.

He began each Mass inviting everyone attending to share their name, where they were from and where they had started their pilgrimage. On the last day, a young man said that he had come from his home in Austria. We all spontaneously clapped, as we knew what a monumental undertaking this would have been! Later in his homily, the priest alluded to our accomplishment in persisting on the Camino and continuing to the end. And then he said, "But if that's all it's about – your great accomplishment, it's nothing. It's still all about you. What is important is – and he did this – (go over and lift up host) – "Do you have Jesus in your heart?"

And then he would say, "My English is so limited so that's all I really have to say," and he ended his homily that way each day. It was really effective. And I took note. But here I am..... still speaking. Still using words. And hoping that they are serving God and this community.

Words can build up, and words can tear down. Jesus used words in a powerful way to turn the people back towards

relationship with God. But it's actions that speak the louder than words. Do we walk our talk? Jesus did. Right to the end. All is forgiven. God loves us. Heaven is near.

How do we communicate this incredible message?

By the way we live our lives.

And, as Father Juan said, by making sure we receive Jesus regularly into our hearts. And in a few moments we get to do that.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.