

Church of the Crossroads
Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
January 28, 2007
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CONFESSING THE FAITH

Jeremiah 1:4-10
1 Corinthians 13
Luke 4:14-30

We live in a culture that often denigrates the power of the word. In a time when more and more words enter our lives through the internet and its blogs, through the television with its hundreds of channels, through advertising, and through speeches given by politicians and TV evangelists, we find ourselves inundated with words, words, words. This has led, surely, to the popular wisdom saying, “don’t just talk the talk; you have to walk the walk.”

We contemporary folk, whether religious or not, just don’t trust words the way we perhaps once did. When I was younger and limited to the words of school teachers and friends, the newspaper, the radio, and of course, my own father’s sermons, words were important. Our meal hours were filled with words and conversation and debate. There were few distractions.

It is not the same anymore. Families are just as likely to eat in front of a television set as around a table. No wonder we feel that talk has become cheap and that we need to “walk the walk.”

Somehow, we need to restore the importance and power of meaningful speech to our lives, for, in truth, words do have great power. The right word at the right time can make a difference. Words can tear down and build up. Words can speak the one thing that needs to be said, the one thing that can change the world.

As those who find themselves immersed in the Judeo-Christian tradition, we know how important words are. The ancient story describes a God who speaks and the creation comes into being. The Christian story describes Jesus as that same word of God which became flesh.

Our Gospel reading today tells of the power and importance of the prophetic word. In the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus speaks a prophetic

word so powerful that those who hear the word want to throw him over a cliff.

It is a fascinating story. At first, the familiar words of the prophet Isaiah spoken by Jesus have little impact. They were so familiar to those who heard them that they had lost their power. After Jesus finishes the reading, everyone speaks well of him. He is a carpenter's son who has done well for himself. So Jesus has to "up the ante." He reveals what is really in the hearts of those who have heard the words. "Heal yourself, instead of us," "prove yourself to us," they probably wanted to say to him. Jesus then repeats the familiar proverb that a prophet is never accepted in the prophet's hometown. And then, to shake up the complacency and self-satisfied attitudes of the good religious folk of his hometown, Jesus recalls times when God worked through Gentiles rather than through God's chosen people. It is then that the good folk of Nazareth chase him out of town to a hill where they intend to throw him over a cliff to his death. Somehow, mysteriously, miraculously, Jesus escapes his fate.

Jesus, the prophet, stands in the tradition of the prophets of old. This morning, we also heard the story of the call of Jeremiah to his prophetic ministry. Jeremiah is representative of every prophet. He feels unworthy for the task. He is only an inexperienced youth. Recall that Moses felt unworthy because he could not speak well. Recall that Jesus was only a carpenter's son. It seems that God does not call the self-sufficient, the bold and beautiful, or the capable to prophetic ministry. God calls those who will know their dependence upon God. In Paul's well known passage found in the 13th chapter of 1st Corinthians, it is the presence of love, love for God and love for neighbor that will make the difference. "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love I am a noisy gong and a clanging symbol."

The prophetic ministry is a ministry dependent upon the presence and power of God. It is a ministry of the word. Assuring Jeremiah he will not be alone, God then puts forth God's hand and touches Jeremiah's mouth. Jeremiah's prophetic ministry will be a ministry of powerful speech, speech that will bring things about in the world, speech that will pluck up, pull down, destroy, and overthrow, and also speech that will build and plant.

We ourselves know of such speech. We know the power of John F. Kennedy's inaugural speech and the power of Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech. Such speech changes the world.

With all that has been said about the importance of the word and the power of speech, I want now, if you will bear with me, to turn to the need for the church to speak the prophetic word, and also a theological consideration.

The theological consideration has to do with the contrast between two modes of speech, that of professing the faith and confessing the faith.

First, *professing* the faith. This is the act of saying what we believe. It is an important act and essential to the faith. People of faith need to say, even tentatively, what they believe about God, about the person and work of Jesus, about the character and role of the Spirit. In the history of the church, the act of professing the faith gave rise to the creeds. At the back of the hymnal, you will find some of the creeds, namely, The Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and also the Statement of Faith of the United Church of the Christ, which is not actually a creed, but an important profession of faith nonetheless.

These are important statements of belief that may or may not mirror your own beliefs about the faith. They are meant to be spoken. And yet, at the same time, they are to be contrasted to another mode of speech, and that is the act of *confessing* the faith.

Confessing the faith also involves words and speech, but confessing the faith is proclaiming, speaking the one prophetic word that needs to be spoken to the particular context in which we find ourselves. To confess the faith is to own, avow, declare, reveal, or disclose what one considers to be true, not apart from the world, but within a specific worldly context. When the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany declared its faith in *The Barmen Declaration*, a set of beliefs that set itself apart from the Nazi regime, it was engaged in the act of confessing the faith.

Another example from that time serves to make the distinction between professing the faith and confessing the faith. You may recall that Adolph Hitler was able to co-opt the established church to serve the purposes and ends of the Third Reich. There was even a position created to do so. It was called the Reichsbischof, or "the Bishop of the Reich." Ludwig Müller served as Hitler's Reichsbischof. Müller, perhaps sensing some discomfort due to his endorsement of the ideology and program of the Third Reich, said, "I can accept *all* the creeds." He found himself able to profess all the creeds, to say "yes" to all the beliefs of the Christian faith. A sharp contrast to Ludwig Müller was Heinrich Grüber, the founder of the

Grüberbüro, an organization which helped pastors and Jews escape from the Nazis. Heinrich Grüber, when asked what he believed, said, simply, “The *gospel* in our time is that Jesus Christ was a Jew.” Whereas Hitler’s bishop could easily profess the faith, Heinrich Grüber took on the risk of confessing the faith. He spoke the one prophetic word that needed to be spoken in a worldly context in which the lives of the Jewish people were in jeopardy.

Confessions of faith are often simple and straightforward. In the context in which we find ourselves, there are two confessions of faith that come to mind, confessions that I hope might be spoken by us individually and corporately as those who belong to Church of the Crossroads.

Both confessions are directly from the Bible. One has to do with the growing and dangerous struggle between the West and the Middle East, which takes the form of threats and acts of vengeance, whether terrorist acts or wars such as the Iraq war. In such a context, the one word we Christians ought to speak is a word that comes from both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Testament. It is only one sentence long. Here it is. “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says God.” (Deuteronomy 32:35 and Romans 12:19). Vengeance does not belong to us; vengeance belongs to God. We need to proclaim a prophetic word against all human acts of vengeance, whether acts of terrorism or our own acts of war making. We best leave vengeance up to God. The Gospel in our time is that vengeance belongs to God.

The other confession of faith that needs to be spoken in our context is a word that takes into account the ever growing threat of global warming and its dire consequences, not only for human life but for the life of the planet itself. This confession of faith comes from the words of the Psalmist who said, “The earth is God’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.” (Psalm 24:1) The earth belongs to God; we are called to be faithful stewards of that which belongs to God in the first place. The earth is simply not ours to do with as we please. The earth belongs to God. Such a prophetic word needs to be spoken again and again by the church in our day. The Gospel in our time is that the earth belongs to God.

Such words, such confessions of faith, if spoken boldly and powerfully, can change the world. I believe that with all my heart. We are, after all, inheritors of a prophetic tradition that places importance and power in the one word that needs to be spoken. May that tradition live on in the words we ourselves speak and confess. May it be so. Amen.