

“Leadership: Caring for Conversation”
James 1:19-20, 26; 3:5-10; Genesis 1:1-13

During a nationally and internationally televised State of the Union Address, when the President of the United States appeared before Congress, the nation, and the world, a member of Congress yells out during the President’s speech: “You lie!”

During a debate about abortion in the House of Representatives, as a member of the House rises to speak, another Representative shouts at him: “Baby killer.”

A pastor of a fundamentalist church which believes military deaths are the result of God punishing America for tolerating homosexuality displays signs at soldier’s funerals reading: “Thank God for dead soldiers.”

At a town hall meeting at Furman University, a United State Senator is called a “hypocrite” and a “traitor.”

A television minister explains Haiti’s devastating earthquake by declaring that the Haitian people “swore a pact to the devil.”

From politicians and ministers to athletes and movie stars we are now subjected to insults and negative depictions that most of our mothers taught us were inappropriate, rude, and certainly not what Jesus would say. Nor are you and I immune to it. Especially in non face to face encounters, we are emboldened to describe people with words we never would utter if they were standing beside us. Though we may quickly name numerous talk radio or television hosts as culprits, most of us have probably experienced sending an email that we later regret.

This past February Jean and I were invited to an Anglican conference in Rome and one of the speakers was Timothy Radcliffe, a well known Roman Catholic author and preacher who is also head of the Dominican brotherhood. In one of his lectures he stated that he believed that the primary responsibility of leadership was to care for conversation. This sermon owes much to the ideas Radcliffe elicited that day, as it does to the epistle writer James who I think would agree with Mr. Radcliffe.

Genesis 1:1-3: *“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.”*

We are most like God when we speak. When God speaks, things happen. Light, earth, plants, animals, all come about, find their source in the voice of God. God’s words produce a reaction.

Speech is what sets us off from other living creatures. And our human speech creates a reaction. The words from our mouth cause things to happen. Our words spark movement and motion, ignite feelings and images, produce energy and initiate rest.

When we think in terms of leadership — as parents, coaches, teachers, youth advisors, pastors, politicians, all the ways and places we speak, the question becomes how each one of us cares for conversation. What is the result of our speech? Do we speak words that encourage, give life, joy, healing? Or, do we speak words that harm, hurt, or discourage?

The first step in caring for conversation is understanding the power our words hold. Again, when we speak we are most like God. The use of language enables us to create, or destroy, just like God. Angry words can start wars, destroy friendships, create turmoil, break up homes. Whereas positive words can inspire nations, create calm, strike a blow for justice, or bring peace to a tormented soul. The writer of James says: “From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.”

Whenever we speak, we always create something — joy, sadness, fear, trust, disenchantment, confusion, strength — the list is ongoing. But whenever we open our mouths, we manufacture something both in others and within ourselves. The ability to speak imitates God. But *what* we say determines whether or not we become like God.

An interoffice softball game was held every year between the marketing department and support staff of one company. The day of the game, as hard as the marketers tried, the support staff whipped the marketing department soundly. But, in its best tradition, the marketing department decided to create the best “spin” they could on the dismal result. They showed how they earn their keep by posting this memo on the bulletin board after the game: “The marketing department is pleased to announce that for the recently completed softball season, we came in second place, having lost but one game all year. The support department, however, had a rather dismal season, as they won only one game all year.”

Each of us must always ask ourselves if what we are about to say seeks to create winners or losers.

So, how do we care for conversation? The first step is to de-dramatize. The greatest event in history has occurred — Christ crucified, Christ buried, Christ risen. We live in a world that is driven by hype. News soundbites, commercial jingles, political speeches all carry the intent of ratcheting up the rhetoric, gaining more attention. But as Christians, we believe the most important event in history has already occurred. Spiritually, morally, ethically, even physically, nothing compares with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Otherwise, life flows downward from the resurrection of Jesus. There will not be another historical event as important.

Which means that whatever happens is not as essential, relevant, or life changing as what has already occurred. Which, in turn, gives us perspective about our own lives. As the great Christian apologist and author G.K. Chesterton once said, “If you take God seriously, you don’t have to take yourself too seriously.”

Or another way to give perspective is to remember the old saying: “Today a peacock, tomorrow a feather duster.”

This understanding of our place within the cosmic and spiritual universe enables us to de-dramatize what is occurring around us. True leadership calls people into unity and reconciliation. This often means that a Christian leader takes the first step into vulnerability, rejecting the temptation to overstate, over dramatize, ratchet up the conversation for the purpose of drawing attention.

And this responsibility of de-dramatizing occurs at both ends of speech — the speaker and the listener. For instance, the purpose of a sermon is to move us into a new space. Yet, the constant temptation is to listen and say, “I do like this or I don’t like that.” We become less willing to be surprised, to allow the Spirit of God to move us in a different direction. Believing the historical and spiritual fact of Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection enables us to see all actions and speech in the light of what God has already done.

A man told about parking in front of the mall, wiping off his car. He had just come from the car wash and was waiting for his wife to get out of work. Coming his way from across the parking lot was what society would consider a bum. From the looks of him, he had no car, no home, no clean clothes and no money. There are times when you feel generous, and then there are other times when you just don’t want to be bothered. This was one of those “don’t want to be bothered” times for the man.

“I hope he doesn’t ask me for any money,” he thought to himself. He didn’t. He came and sat on the curb in front of the bus stop, but he didn’t look like he could have enough money to even ride the bus. After a few minutes he spoke. “That’s a very pretty car,” he said. He was ragged, but he had an air of dignity around him. The man said, “Thanks,” and continued wiping off his car.

The man sat there quietly as he worked. The expected plea for money never came. As the silence between them widened, something inside him said, “Ask him if he needs any help.” He was sure that he would say, “Yes.” “Do you need any help?” he asked.

He answered in three simple words that the man would never forget. We often look for wisdom in great men and women. We expect it from those of higher learning and accomplishments. He expected nothing from this man but an outstretched, grimy hand. His answer took him completely by surprise. “Don’t we all?” he said.

The man was feeling high and mighty, successful and important, above a bum in the street, until those three words shook him to the core. “Don’t we all?” He needed help. Maybe not for the bus fare or a place to sleep, but he needed help. He reached in his wallet and gave him not only enough for bus fare, but enough to get a warm meal and shelter for the day. Those three little words rang in his ear.

Caring for conversation means we recognize that the world's main event has occurred — Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. And each of us stands equal before that event, in need of help, in need of salvation.

“...but no one can tame the tongue — a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.”

Christian leadership is when we see other people as Christ sees them. As Radcliffe noted, “We can share no moral issue with others until we express God's delight with them.” There is a temptation to view people as chess pieces, rivals, problems, friends, enemies, etc. In an attempt to make them complicit in our agendas, we categorize them according to their benefit to us. But to curse another human being, to harm them with our speech is to distort the creation, fragment the will of God. Our speech has the ability to create within others either the positive sense of God's grace or a cloud of sin and degradation. The word of God, the good news of the gospel proclaims forgiveness and new life in Christ.

We must work not to be ruled by the agenda of others. We see this aspect of leadership play out over and over in Jesus' life. People always tried to trap Jesus into alternatives — stone her or don't stone her, come now and heal Lazarus or don't come and he will die. Yet, Jesus consistently found a third way, a different path.

We live in a world that constantly attempts to push us into either/or decisions. For or against health care? For or against homosexuality? For or against donuts at the church reception? Jesus teaches us to look first at people, the creation of God, the likeness of God. That is where we begin, embracing people as the very essence of God's creation, those for whom Christ has died. Christian decision making begins with the premise that every single human being on this globe is a child of God, a person of value, because Jesus gave his life for everyone of them.

Marj Carpenter, former moderator of the Presbyterian Church's General Assembly, tells about a non-denominational school who invited a Catholic nun to speak on the scripture passage, “In my father's house are many mansions...” During the question period one lad asked, “Are there any mansions for Presbyterians?” “Oh, yes,” answered the nun with a sly smile, “but unfortunately they are usually near the elevator and the ice machine.”

Our belief that every person is made in the image of God means we believe all of us get oceanfront rooms with a balcony.

“Leadership: Caring for Conversation”

Whether we are displaying leadership in our marriages, families, jobs, church, or nation, each one of us assumes the mantle of leader. And, when we speak in these situations is when we are most like God. Our words have an affect, on others and ourselves. When we understand that history's central event, the life,

death, and resurrection of Jesus has occurred, we are freed up to de-dramatize our vocal proclamations. We grasp our place within the universe, and by seeing other people as Christ sees them, we employ our speech to bring unity and reconciliation to our lives and the lives of others.

This morning, are you and I caring for our conversation? Or, do we use it to move people on the chess board of our agendas, trapping them into our alternatives? Allow me to phrase the question in a way that challenges every one of us: When you and I speak, do people hear Jesus?

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