

THE WORDS OF OUR MOUTHS

Today's Gospel reading opens with an account of the radical nature of Jesus's teaching. In one sentence spoken to a crowd, He appears to dismiss a core tenet of Jewish law: "Listen and understand," he said, "it is *not* what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth that defiles." This was heard as a broadside on Jewish dietary rituals, and as an attack on the Pharisees that might be described today as "cancel culture." Jesus seemed to be canceling not only the Pharisees, but also large portions of the book of Leviticus.

The disciples, as Jews, were surprised and confused. "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" they asked Jesus afterwards, likely using the Pharisees as a cover to express their own concerns. Jesus's response was blunt. "They are blind guides of the blind," he said of the Pharisees. "And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." Peter then confesses his own perplexity and asks Jesus directly what He means by what He said to the crowd. Jesus has a moment of impatience and then explains. "Do you not see that whatever goes *into* the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? But what comes *out* of the mouth *proceeds from the heart*, and *this* is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

As Rob Banse pointed out in his Weekly Reflection of August 3, Jesus certainly did not rescind the law of the Old Testament. Ten chapters before today's Gospel reading, Matthew quotes Jesus on this very point: "Do not think I have come to abolish the law or the prophets," Jesus said. "I have not come to abolish but to fulfill." His message for us today is about that fulfilling. His message is that there is far more to righteousness than merely complying with the

letter of the law. He is setting priorities for us. The expressions of our hearts – the words of our mouths and our actions – are paramount, more important than our rituals. This emphasis on things of the heart is at the core of Christianity. Jesus is declaring a new order of things.

Jesus makes his point by focusing on the *negative* consequences that can flow from an evil heart. It's quite the parade of horrors: murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander -- all of which do seem a tad worse than eating the wrong things, or eating the right things but with unwashed hands.

I'd like to focus on one illustration of Jesus's point – that is, *the power of words* as expressions of our hearts.

In Jesus's time, most communication was face-to-face and oral. The words of one's mouth were the principal means of social intercourse. The literacy rate was low. Writing and reading were generally the province of select groups in government and religious circles. The instruments of writing – the inks, papyrus, vellum, parchment – were time-consuming to produce and not widely available.

Much has changed over time in how people express themselves. Our bodies' means of communication have progressed down the body from the mouth to include the hand, the fingers, and sometimes just the thumbs. (Today we often let our fingers do the talking, to paraphrase the old Yellow Pages slogan.) And the reach of one's expressions has expanded exponentially, far beyond the sound of one's natural voice. The printing press enabled mass communication centuries ago. In the last century, radio and television revived the prominence of the voice in communication, but only a limited number of voices have access to those media. The biggest change in communication has been in the last quarter century, when the internet

has given a megaphone to billions and magnified the power of words. We all have amplifiers now. Anyone, it seems, can become an influencer, a blogger, or a tweeter with thousands or even millions of followers. Even if you're not a social media aficionado, who among us hasn't experienced the power of an e-mail "reply to all"?

This expansion in the means of communication has exacerbated the potential harms of which Jesus spoke in describing the importance of what comes out of our mouths. The internet often seems to dissolve the filter, the check, normally inherent in face-to-face communications. It allows people to avoid the responsibility and accountability that comes from having to look at another's face as one speaks, to see and feel the impact of one's words on another human being, to have to hear the other's immediate response. How much easier it is to fire off an intemperate e-mail than to pick up the phone and have a conversation with a friend or a colleague who may have disappointed you. Social media platforms that enable communications to be made anonymously or pseudonymously seem to bring out the very worst in some people – in Jesus's words, to defile them.

Many of us may have experienced the consequences of digital negativity personally. We have all surely read or heard about the person left in tears, the reputation wrongly destroyed, the relationship shattered, the teenage suicide induced by cyberbullying. Some digital negativity and its consequences are wholly unintended but flow from the nature of the medium, particularly its inability to convey tone. (I myself look forward to the day when artificial intelligence allows you to run a draft e-mail through an app that might be called ToneChek©, sort of like spell check.) The risks of hurtful digital communications, whether intended or not, are heightened in our current environment, where our opportunities for face-

to-face communications are very limited and our dependence on the internet is at an all-time high.

Jesus spoke of the capacity of what comes from the mouth to cause harm and to defile the speaker. His explicit focus was on the negative. But when he said “what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart,” he was implicitly making the converse point, too: that our words also have the power to do good. Our words can honor, uplift, support, empower, and renew others. And just as the internet can magnify vice, it can magnify virtue. What a vehicle each of us has to spread encouragement, respect, gratitude, dignity, affection, admiration, understanding, sympathy, faith, hope, and love. What capacity each of us has to dispel or at least reduce loneliness, depression, anxiety, insecurity, and hurt. Whatever negative consequences the internet has for the human condition can be more than offset by the positive opportunities it gives us. But only if we take advantage of them. We have to use the power of our words for good, and we have to be intentional about it. As Martin Luther King said, “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

The coarsening of our discourse today is both pervasive and corrosive. It feeds on itself, and it defiles us. We need not and must not be mere passive observers of this phenomenon. We can all do *something* to harness the power of our words for good and to set an example that will ripple out. This isn't rocket science. It's not hard. But it does involve more than just avoiding negativity. It can start with simple disciplines that become routines, like expressing gratitude to another person at least twice every day. Or resolving every time you open your inbox to send at least one positive e-mail. Your positive e-mail can be a reply to an e-mail you

received – and if it is, go ahead and reply to all. Amplify others’ successes by tweeting or retweeting or sharing them. Don’t just like someone else’s post; take a few more seconds and comment on how much you like it. Share good news and inspiring stories. Lift up role models – there are lot of really good people out there who don’t get the recognition they deserve. If you know people who are isolated and lonely because of the pandemic, call them to check in periodically, or e-mail them, or Zoom with them, or engage with them on social media. These can be our new digital rituals, practiced with the daily regularity of the Jewish dietary rituals, but focused on what comes out of us, not what goes in.

I recently saw a beautiful example of the power of words emanating from a heart -- a heart of gold. Before he died, Congressman John Lewis wrote an essay that he asked be published on the day of his funeral. *The New York Times* honored his wish. Congressman Lewis described the time he first heard Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on an old radio. It was 1955: “He was talking,” Congressman Lewis wrote, “about the philosophy and discipline of nonviolence. He said we are *all* complicit when we tolerate injustice. He said it is not enough to say it will get better by and by. He said *each of us* has a moral obligation to stand up, *speak up, and speak out*. When you see something that is not right, *you must say something*. You must do something.”

Congressman Lewis was a deeply Christian man. He graduated from the American Baptist Theological Seminary in Nashville and was ordained as a Baptist minister. Jesus’s core lesson of love permeated the way Congressman Lewis lived his life. He closed his final message to the world with these words:

Though I may not be here with you, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe. In my life I have done

all I can to demonstrate that the way of love and nonviolence is the more excellent way. Now it is your turn to let freedom ring.

When historians pick up their pens to write the story of the 21st century, let them say it was your generation who laid down the heavy burdens of hate at last and that peace finally triumphed over violence, aggression, and war. So I say to you, walk with the wind, brothers and sisters, and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide.

Congressman Lewis's words were the most read item on newyorktimes.com for two days in a row.

May the words of our mouths be acceptable to you, O Lord.

Amen.