

Being the Church at Brentwood

Watch Your Tongue

**Ps 19 & James 3:1-12
(712, 15, 505, 498)**

September 16, 2012

I had a profoundly enlightening experience this week.
I spent the first three days of the week in Winnipeg.
I spent the most of Tuesday with the Rev. Dr. Margaret Mullin,
Executive Director of the Winnipeg Inner City Missions,
a ministry of The Presbyterian Church in Canada.
Margaret was a student of mine at Vancouver School of Theology.
She spent the early years of her ministry in Brandon, Manitoba,
then moved to the inner city of Winnipeg
to work with the aboriginal people who live there 13 years ago.

Under her leadership, the Winnipeg Inner City Missions was formed in 2003
following an organizational merger
between Anishinabe Fellowship Centre and Flora House.
The missions' mandate is to help provide a safe, nurturing and peaceful atmosphere
in which people can begin to achieve their potential
and find their way to having adequate food, clothing and a safe place to live,
being listened to and understood,
achieving employment,
and developing physical, emotional, spiritual, and social well-being.

Their vision is an inner city community
where people live in harmony and balance
within themselves and with each other.

As we were driving the streets of that community,
Margaret was telling me story after story
of the daily struggles and challenges faced by
the aboriginal people with whom she work –
multi-generational poverty, gang violence,
multiple addictions, unemployment, lack of appropriate education,
social alienation and exclusion.

One story in particular was profoundly enlightening.

Margaret was driving through the neighbourhood
with one of the members of their worshipping community,
a mother who had lost a son and other family members
to death by disease and gang violence.
They passed a person passed out on the sidewalk.

“There is a good man,”
this wise woman said,
“with an alcohol problem.”

I was struck by the power of those nine little words
to paint a powerful picture of dignity, worth, and hope.

“There is a good man with an alcohol problem.”

There is a profoundly positive worldview
expressed in those nine little words.
That person, no matter what complex set of factors
led to him lying there on the sidewalk,
is a **good** person.
He has problems, but don't we all.
Whatever those complex form those problems may take
in this earthen vessel we live in,
that person is a treasure
because he was created and is loved by God.

This goes back to what we experienced last week
in our conversations with James
about the importance of recognizing the inner worth
with which God has graced every person.

It picks up on the passage we read this morning
that highlights the power of words
for good and for ill.

Think, for a moment, of the words many people would use,
either in their minds or out loud:

“There's another drunken native.”

Can you sense the difference?

In the “drunken native” statement,
in those words,
the person is defined by the problem.
The person is a drunk.

That's how we label them with our tongues, with our words.
And in the verbal labelling, we too often dismiss them.

In the words of the wise woman from the inner city of Winnipeg,
the person is a good man,
a child and friend of God created in God's image,
a person deserving of the dignity and respect that comes for God's love.

Granted, the person has problems.
Attitudes and behaviours are getting in the way of that goodness
being fully and constructively expressed.
But the person himself is good.
And the way we talk about that person
has the potential to reflect the Christian conviction that he is good.
And that conviction has the potential to inspire us to help
in ways most appropriate to our gifts and circumstances.

The source of that goodness is God's gift
of a full and abundant life,
seen most clearly in the compassion and courage of Jesus Christ,
and offered continually by the work of the Holy Spirit.
Many things happen within us and to us
that interfere with the flourishing of that God-given life.
But nothing can take it away from us.
It is God's intent for us and gift to us.

Our tongues and the words they form
express what is in our souls.
They express our core convictions.
It's not simply a matter of watching our tongues,
but much more importantly
watching the core convictions and attitudes
that motivate and activate our tongues.

It really is about how we see the world –
through the loving, compassionate, and courageous
eyes of Jesus Christ
or through the envious, bitter, ambitious, and selfish
eyes of people ignorant of and alienated from their Creator.

James draws the arresting contrast
between the way we talk with God in prayer and worship
and the way we talk about others in our daily lives,
with the clear implication that the former should shape the latter.
If the heart of the law is love God, love neighbour, and love self,
then all three should be treated with the same dignity, respect, and hope.

It brought back to my mind
the parable in Matthew about the sheep and the goats.
The point of that story is how we see each other and treat each other,
how we talk to and about each other.

*“When did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger
or naked or sick or in prison, and would not help you?”
The King will reply, “I tell you, whenever you refused to help
one of these least important ones, you refused to help me.”
(Matthew 25:44-45)*

It is clear from this story and many other passages in the Scriptures
that God identifies deeply with his human creatures,
so deeply, in fact, that the way we talk to, talk about, and treat them
is felt by God as the way we are talking to, talking about, and treating him.
We are urged to treat God, neighbours, and selves
with the same reverence and respect.

The good man with an alcohol problem
is a beloved child and friend of God,
no matter how alienated he has become from that source of life.
We who are close to it are called to recognize his true nature
and discipline our tongues and words to restore and reinforce that nature.

Those words have real power.
Let's use them carefully and compassionately this week and every week.

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