

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Easter 3-C; 5 May 2019
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster

Words Have Power

In nomine...

I. Intro

Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

The story I want to tell today, the one that captured my imagination this week, is the surprising parallel I saw between Saul and what I saw in the national news.

Saul isn't just some law enforcement officer, even though he obtained an arrest warrant through official channels.

We know from elsewhere that Saul is a brilliant and privileged scholar, but that isn't what we see playing out in our first reading today either.

Instead, our reading begins with Saul "breathing threats and murder." Threats and murder.

Words have power, and words almost never exist in a vacuum. They exist in a community of conversation. That community may be a family, or a group of co-workers. It may be a school or a church. It may be drinking buddies or members of a particular club. It may be an online message board, or an informal community linked by the chains of emails they pass around. But it is in community that words are tried out, and repeated, and embraced and legitimized. And the ends to which those words lead can be radically different, depending on the words that are said.

I felt like I was physically assaulted this week as report after report of violence, actual and threatened, rolled in through the news. It started while I was standing here in the nave preparing for the first worship service of the weekend last Saturday, when Deacon John told me about the shooting in the Chabad Poway synagogue in San Diego. The shooter had been shaped by a community of anti-semitic words and ideas. The next day a US Army veteran was arrested by undercover officers as he prepared to bomb a rally protesting white nationalism. He, too, existed within a community of words and ideas that perceived that rally as, if not a threat, then an insult or a challenge. And on it goes.

In our account from Acts, Saul exists within a community that feels deeply threatened by this new Christian movement. You can tell the depths of the feeling in that community, the extremes of rhetoric, by Saul's response, his emotional engagement, the way he scrambles down the dusty road from Jerusalem to Damascus, all the while "breathing threats and murder."

Saul is another one of those guys we hear about in the news. And a religious zealot to boot! If he was Muslim, that arrest warrant from the high priest would be called a fatwa and the media would refer to him as a terrorist. It's only if we claim him as one of our own, good old St. Paul, that maybe we'll let him pass with a little white privilege and go easy on the condemnation, because he turns out alright in the end.

II. Thesis

But Ananias knew better, didn't he? That's why when God tells Ananias to go help out poor, blind Saul, Ananias has the audacity to talk back to God. He figures he must be missing something. In our reading today, Saul is no saint. He is a force of evil. Words of threat and murder are what empower young men like Saul to go out and hurt people, to tear apart families, to preside at lynchings, and all because Saul and the others in his echo chamber have chosen to label someone as "different" and "other." Because *they* worship God differently than *we* do. And for that, *they* deserve to die.

It's the story of Israel's genocidal conquest of Canaan in the book of Deuteronomy. It's the story of the Crusades and the Inquisition. It's the story of Colonialism, Manifest Destiny, American slavery, Jim Crow, and the current epidemic of mass incarceration that falls so disproportionately on men and boys of color. It's the story of anti-semitism, white nationalism,

anti-muslim prejudice and the dehumanization of migrants and refugees. It's the story of mass shootings coming fast and thick across our newsfeeds and no one able figure out anything to do about it! It's the story of racist jokes and conversations that are allowed to stand without objection. It is the story of movies that glorify violence and the portrayal of one group as more noble than another. It is the story of memes and texts, email threads and social media posts, that continue to get passed around: legitimizing and encouraging ever more debased ideas and ideologies until finally someone gets shot.

Saul's words of "threats and murder" did not exist in a vacuum. The words that influenced acts of violence and mayhem this week did not exist in a vacuum. They were part of an ongoing conversation, a conversation which began with a mildly anti-semitic comment and culminated in the slaughter of people in the midst of their prayers last Saturday. They are words that we hear and overhear every day, and we get to decide what our role is going to be in those conversations.

III. Good News

The purpose of the church, the reason we gather in community, is to help each of us to make that decision based on what we hear Jesus speaking into our lives. When Saul encountered Jesus, he turned his whole life around, and started participating in a whole different set of conversations. We can do that too. The church is a community of conversation that is different from the dividing, condemning, violence-advocating words that sell so many newspapers and movie tickets around us.

And as we participate in that alternative conversation, as we learn to hear Jesus speaking new words into our lives, we, like Saul, learn to speak new words into the world around us. We take steps to counter all the prejudice and exclusion, the words of death we encounter around us, with a message of welcome. We take the welcome we have experienced from God, and make it explicit, specific, to others, like that paragraph so many of you have commented on in our bulletin:

St. Thomas' welcomes all regardless of age, abilities, physical or mental health, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity, income, education, political affiliation or faith commitment. The things which bind us are greater than the things that separate us, and the love of God is greater than all our divisions.

IV. Invitation

There are many different conversations going on in the world today. Your words have influence. You get to choose which words to perpetuate, and which to leave behind.

May God's words shine in each of us. Instead of all the drama and noise of politics and commerce and violence blinding us to the presence of God, may the words of God fill us such that our eyes and ears and hearts may be drawn first of all to the Kingdom of God, and every other thing only through the lens of God's Kingdom. May our words be words of life, the words of God. Because words have power. And God has entrusted that power to us.

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