

Small Blessings

Sermon by Luke Powery on September 16, 2012 in Page Auditorium

In the fall of 2006, the children from the Dupree Center for Children, the preschool at Princeton Theological Seminary, participated in one of the daily chapel services in Miller Chapel. There was a lively buzz in the air on this day as you can imagine. For this same service, I was asked to lead the congregation in the singing of the spiritual hymn “Guide My Feet While I Run This Race.” I was happy to do this and thought it would be cool for my daughter, Moriah, who was 4 years old at the time, to see her father in action. I rose and took my place in the front of the chapel. As I led that hymn, Moriah stood in the front row staring at me, not singing a lick. No lips-moving, no smile-making, no eye-winking, just a numb stare. I knew she could become easily embarrassed by me in public by what she considered to be my lack of sophistication in relation to clothing fashion. But that wasn’t it this time. I thought her countenance at chapel was pretty strange for her personality, so when I arrived home later that afternoon, I asked her, “What did you think about daddy’s singing today sweetie?” She said something I’ll never forget: “You sing like Cookie Monster.”

Yes, Cookie Monster. That one on Sesame Street. The one with blue fur and googly eyes. The one who says, “Me want cookie.” The one who eats everything and anything. That one. It’s been 6 years, and I’m still eating humble pie. I still haven’t gotten over it! I learned a lot on that day about the power of imagistic words, like Cookie Monster.

Words create worlds as we heard a couple of weeks ago from Barbara Brown Taylor. Words shape the contour of our life together at a university but also within other domains of the community of humanity. We read words, write words, listen to words, and speak words. If we do anything in institutions of higher learning, we dialogue with one another, as we grapple and wrestle with ideas, in hope that this intellectual engagement would stimulate service to the broader society and make an impact on the world. At least, this is what I am sensing at Duke thus far. This does not mean that the totality of who we are is solely a human head on top of a stack of books, but it does mean that within this educational milieu there is an oasis for conversation. Verbal exchange, or a dialogical dance, modeled after the perichoretic relationality between the three persons of the Trinity includes mutual teaching and learning and intellectual interpenetration through human speech. In fact, there should exist an ethics of antiphony between silence and speech, and listening and speaking, within any human setting.

James’ moral pedagogical passion includes the ethics of speech within the Christian community. He is very much aware of God’s gorgeous garden of creation: God’s natural chapel. He speaks of horses, wind, forests, beasts, birds, reptiles, sea creatures, springs, water, trees, but most of all, fire. He reveals his own macro sense of the created order yet his particular interest and emphasis is microscopic in nature as he centers in on human bodies, and more specifically, the tongue, his metaphor for human speech. James is not investigating whether we’ve pierced our tongue or not. He’s exploring the ethics of our rhetoric. If 20th century philosophers of language like J. L. Austin of Oxford can publish a book called *How to Do Things with Words* and talk about

“performative utterances” as part of a speech act theory, in which words become acts such as greeting, warning, or inviting, then James can invite us to ask ourselves, “What do we do with our words?” How does our speech act? Because once we have spoken, our words never return but travel in the acoustical atmosphere, doing things.

James does not encourage us to set up a therapeutic 24-hour hotline. From the beginning of his letter, James exhorts his audience to “be quick to listen, slow to speak” (1:19). He knew that “a still tongue makes a wise head” and that silence is a prelude to sound. Or, as Howard Thurman, the mystic prophet and former dean of the chapels at Howard and Boston Universities, said, “silence is a door to God.” James understands the power of words but is wary of words *ad infinitum*. He himself is wise enough to recognize the human condition, that is, that “all of us make many mistakes,” especially those of us who are teachers and preachers who specialize in the utilization of words as stewards of words in a vocation of the Word. He places a flashing, red, neon, warning sign at the beginning of this teaching on human speech.

Words, speech, are highlighted in all of this week’s lections. In Proverbs, “Wisdom cries out in the street and raises her voice” (1:20). In the Psalms, the heavens tell of God’s glory and the firmament proclaims God’s handiwork (19:1). In Mark, Jesus asks his disciples that probing question that still interrogates us, “Who do you say that I am?” (8:28). But James paints a picture of the tragedy of the tongue. Earlier in his letter, he spoke of bridling the tongue. Now, James speaks of it as an untamable terror. It is powerful for sure. It is small, yet it sets things on fire because it is a fire itself. Tongues of fire. And fires can be hard to control.

Just in recent days, an anti-Islam film’s negative portrayal of the prophet Mohammed has sparked violent anti-American protests throughout the world. Words do things. The tongue is that powerful! The hyperbolic homily of James would make anyone shudder and perhaps not want to speak at all. His point is clear about the terror residing in one’s own mouth. It is a “world of iniquity...stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell...[it is] a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (3:6). It makes me want to muzzle my mouth. Small but dangerous - even tragic. It is the tragedy of the tongue. James, ironically though, uses his own tongue to tattletale on the tongue. He’s doing the very thing that he critiques by setting the tongue on fire with his own words.

Something so small, so simple, can write the script of your life narrative, if you let it. Comments from childhood or from a colleague or a teacher—“You’ll never amount to anything,” or, “You’re not smart enough or pretty enough or big enough or good enough; you’re not enough!” can dictate your life. Words can be like fiery grenades that blow up another human being or create wounds that never go away as you wear open sores of hurt on your skin. It’s linguistic terrorism. This is not about stuttering or stumbling over words, nor is it about creative tongue-twisters. “Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers. A peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked. If Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers, Where’s the peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked?” This is about how the tongue, though small, may tie us up in verbal ropes so that we are no longer free to be who God created us to be, but rather become what the untamed tongue named us.

I won't ever forget Clackston from the Episcopal Church of the Holy Comforter in Atlanta. I didn't know that was his name at first because when you first met him and asked him his name, he would just say, "Get out of here. Get out of here." He said that because he came to believe that was his name since everybody always told him to "get out of here." Clackston had to manage a life of mental health issues and being deemed non-human. Can you imagine having your first name be "Get Out" and your last name "Of Here"? Words fueled the tragic drama of demonization that played out in Clackston's life.

A part of the tragedy of the tongue is also the way it double speaks and contradicts itself by not maintaining verbal integrity. It talks out of both sides of the mouth and blesses and curses from the same source. One day it's up and the other day it's down. Sweet and sour chicken may be delightful, but sweet and sour speech is destructive and damaging. Fresh and brackish water can't come from the same spring and both olives and figs can't come from a fig tree. James urges an assessment of our language, our Christian speech, so that there is clarity from this small, yet powerful part of our body.

"The tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits." James proclaims a pretty dour message and emphasizes the tragic nature of the tongue. However, he does suggest that blessing also comes from this small source. The tongue blesses the Lord and Father. As we sing and as we pray, blessing is going forth as it rises as incense to God. Blessing is definitely not highlighted, but it is nonetheless present. It's always easier to point out the negative. The "great exploits" of the tongue do not have to be tragic, but they may actually be beautiful. Implicit in James' rhetoric is a desire for beautiful life-giving speech, or at least a big blessing from a small source.

Whether tragedy or beauty, there is a sense that we should not underestimate the power of something, just because it is small. Little bits in the mouths of horses help to control them. A "very small rudder" guides large ships. Thus, small means can have a huge impact. One little piece of stone falls from the ceiling of Duke Chapel and look what happens—we have worship in Paige Auditorium and all of the pews from the Chapel are removed—a big impact. And, in many ways, our relocation is a blessing to remind us that the church is not a gorgeous gothic cathedral structure of significance: the Church is the people of God.

Rosa Parks refusing to go to the back of the bus during segregation becomes an icon of and impetus for the civil rights movement. A small act, but a big beautiful blessing. Beauty can easily be overlooked in the shadow of tragedy. But retired Baptist minister, J. Alfred Smith, reminds us in his dynamic sermon "Foundations of Faith" that even "hope is a tiny sprout growing up in cracked concrete." Good things may come in small packages and from small means. For someone who has never really known affection, the three words "I love you" may go a long way and have a huge impact. The small gesture of offering a listening ear to someone whom many ignore, sharing a small meal with someone yearning for friendship, saying "good morning" to someone to acknowledge their humanity rather than just walking by, or sending a small note of encouragement to someone struggling with depression may alter the course of a human life. The small things may actually be a big thing. Little is much and small can be great. Thus, the

small things you say or do may, can, and will have a big impact on those around you. It may be as simple as two small words.

My niece left us with two small words. In December 2005, my 10 year old niece, Christiana, the baby girl of one of my brothers, died from a rare auto-immune disease, juvenile dermatomyositis. Only 3 out of 1 million children get it. It's a long name for a disease that shortened her young life. There are no cures. One organ at a time stopped functioning. Here was a little girl, an athlete, who at the worst point couldn't even put on a t-shirt, or lift a towel off of a rack, or open a jar, because she was too weak. Her spirit was willing but her body was weak. Her IV needles were her nails, her hospital bed her cross.

In the midst of this tragedy, she kept a journal. She prayed for her own healing, but many times, at the end of journal entries, she would pray for others. She prayed for her Aunt Gail, my wife, who was pregnant at the time, her uncle J.M. who was in the hospital, or for "the little baby next door in the hospital with the unknown liquid inside her body." But there came a point when she couldn't write in her journal anymore because she was too weak. And on the last day she could muster up enough strength to write, she was interceding for others, praying for other people. Her last two words in the journal are the beginning of a prayer—"also touch." That's how it ends. "Also touch." It's an open-ended prayer for the world. There's no amen to conclude it because this prayer is not finished. It travels on in our lives as a prayer for you and me and everyone else in the world. "Also touch" - two small words that are a beautiful blessing by the grace of God.

But isn't that just like God? A mustard seed represents the kingdom of God. Five loaves of bread and two fish feed thousands. A still small voice is the avenue for God's speech. A small dove represents the Holy Spirit. A small baby is God in the flesh. Something small can really be a big blessing.