

Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles
Third Sunday of Pentecost/Ordinary Time – May 29, 2016 – Memorial Sunday
Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister

Luke 7:1-10

For Reflection

“As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them.”

— John F. Kennedy, U.S. President (1917-1963)

“In the End, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.”

— Martin Luther King, Jr., Civil Rights Leader (1929-1968)

Just Say the Word

There's a lot of talking in this story. It begins with Jesus finishing “all his sayings in the hearing of the people.” Then somebody is talking with a Centurion and tells him about Jesus. He sends some Jewish elders – definitely fans of his – to ask Jesus to heal his slave. The elders not only ask but tell Jesus all about the Centurion and his worthiness.

The Centurion then sends MORE people out to tell Jesus not to bother coming to his house – but just “...speak the word, and let my servant be healed. 8 For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it.”

In other words, the Centurion knows the power of words – and how speaking can make something happen. He is also, apparently, very familiar with Judaism – having made friends among the Jewish elders and build them a synagogue. So it is likely that he knows about this G-d for whom Jesus speaks – a G-d that spoke and the universe came into being. “Let there be light.” And there was light.

Words have power. They used to be enough to shake hands on and be relied on as a contract or covenant – as a person “gave their word” and promised that they would do something. “I am a man of my word...” was a common way to attest to one's integrity. “To go back on one's word...” was to betray someone's trust – to break a covenant or contract and ruin one's reputation.

Words have power and this is still the case. But it is also the case that people IN power – or people SEEKING power – now use the power of words without adhering to the common expectation that those words will be true. If enough people believe you, a lie can become a fact – in public discourse – never more true than on social media or FOX news. We actually NEED organizations like SNOPEs to ferret out the truth for us and help us determine whose words we can trust.

I don't know if people lie more now than in Jesus' time. I'm thinking the human propensity for untruth – especially lies of self-interest – has remained fairly constant. The shift we've seen in our lifetime is the REACH of such lies – the damage done to so many more people because of our electronic communication abilities. The power of words as such hasn't grown – but the REACH of the power of our words has. When I posted a true story about Peter trashing his bedroom in grief and frustration – it was pointed out to me that I may have lost Peter a job in 15 years – because that story is now OUT THERE and speaks to those who want to know if they can trust him – now and in the future. That is terrifying!

Even without social media, the words of Jesus – as interpreted by a few million people – have come down to us through time. And, like a game of telephone, we will always be trying to ferret out the truth of what we've heard and the integrity of the person saying those words.

The only way we are going to make any progress in our search to live a life of integrity – is to pay attention to the veracity of our own speech – the truth of our own lives.

Picking our words carefully...

Speaking only when we have something to say (you may find my reflections getting much shorter...)

Thinking about our interpretations of events – and if we are skewing our reports to put ourselves in a favorable light...

Fact-checking BEFORE we pass on something we've heard...

Considering the Common Good before speaking or acting on our beliefs...

Christian Gospels are often referred to as THE WORD. We need to be careful what we claim – especially when there are so many manipulative and destructive ways THE WORD can be passed on.

If we are going to be People of Our Word – we need to be aware of what we are saying and choose our words carefully. I'd like for all of us to take a few minutes right now – and think about/write down one word or phrase that we consider a word or "words to live by."

What is it that drives my life, motivates many of my actions, directs my relationships?
The word or words speak of your integrity, your truth...
The word or words may be ones that could be chiseled onto our tombstone...
These might be the title of your autobiography...
Take some time right now – and find your words or words...

The word for me right now is “ENOUGH.” It’s a question and a motivation – have I done enough – have I loved enough – have I contributed enough.
On my tombstone I want it written “Her life was enough...” or “She loved enough...”

Does anyone else want to share their word or words?

In closing I’d like to share a brief story about the power of words from a website called The Accidental Talmudist.

Bishop Chrysostomos, the spiritual leader of the Greek island of Zakynthos, stuck his neck out to save all 275 of the island’s Jews during the Nazi occupation of Greece.

On September 9, 1943, Germany occupied the Italian territories, including Greece. Immediately, the German commander ordered all Greek Jews to be assembled for deportation to Poland. The mayor of Zakynthos, Lucas Carrer, was ordered to prepare a list of Jews on the island. Mayor Carrer made the list but before handing it over to the Nazis he went to the local church leader, Bishop Chrysostomos, for counsel.

The bishop told the mayor to burn the list. He then went to the German commander and begged him not to deport the Jews. They were law-abiding citizens with the same rights as all other Greeks. The officer was unmoved and insisted on receiving the list of all Jews on the island.

Bishop Chrysostomos took out a slip of paper, wrote his own name on it, and handed it to the German officer. “Here is the list of Jews you required,” he said.

This action confused the Nazi, and gained the bishop and mayor the time they needed.

Together, they warned all the Jews of Zakynthos that their lives were in danger. They urged their Jewish brethren to hide in the mountains, and promised that Greek islanders would provide them with food and shelter. The people of Zakynthos, led by their brave bishop and mayor, kept their hidden Jews alive until the island was liberated by the Soviet army in late 1944.

In 1978 Bishop Chrysostomos and Mayor Carrer were honored as Righteous Among the Nations by Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

For their great leadership and courage in saving the lives of 275 Jews, we honor Bishop Chrysostomos and Mayor Carrer of Zakynthos, Greece as this week's Thursday Heroes at Accidental Talmudist. With thanks to Jason VanBorssum

Sometimes the only word we need to use – is our own name.

Amen.

Scripture Reading for Sunday May 29, 2016 – Pentecost 3 – Year C

Luke 7:1-10

1 After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. 2 A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. 3 When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave.

4 When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy of having you do this for him, 5 for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us." 6 And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; 7 therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. 8 For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it."

9 When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd that followed him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." 10 When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health.