February 13, 2011

Words Can Hurt, Too
Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Matthew 5:21-24
"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire. So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

For a century and a half or so, children far and wide have learned the taunt: “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” It’s a way of sticking your tongue out at other kids who say mean things. It’s a way of telling yourself it doesn’t hurt, when of course it does. “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.”

There’s truth in it, to be sure. Don’t we all know that sometimes we just have to shrug off something mean or hurtful that someone has said about us? Maybe they were just upset, or spoke in anger. If we can let it go, we can move on.

But sometimes, words hurt very much. They damage relationships. They tear the social fabric that weaves a community together. As psychiatrist Dr. Antonio Wood has observed: “When you speak ill of someone, you alienate yourself from that person. The more negative your comments, the more distant you will feel from the object. Say bad things about many people and your words will separate you from them.”

It’s very healthy that, as a nation, we are currently experiencing an examination of words and their consequences in many aspects of our life together. From workshops on bullying to reconsideration of political speech, we’re asking ourselves if we haven’t let things get out of hand, and if we’ve fostered or at least tolerated a climate of anger, hate and alienation. It’s time to examine ourselves and make some changes. It’s time to reconsider the direction we’ve headed into and ask ourselves if there aren’t perhaps some healthier and holier ways of living together.

I was thinking about this sermon this week when I was driving to a place I’d never been. The woman in my GPS was doing her best to get me there. Those of you who have GPS know what I mean. The voice becomes a person, doesn’t it? Mine is a rather stern woman who repeats herself a lot. “In 0.1 miles, turn right on San Vicente Boulevard. Turn right on San Vicente Boulevard. Turn right on San Vicente Boulevard.” I was just a couple blocks from home and I was already talking back.

The woman in my GPS is smart. She knows a lot, but she doesn’t know all my favorite shortcuts. And when I disobey her command, I think she gets upset with me.
“Recalculating,” she says. “Recalculating,” she repeats, sounding more and more annoyed. The other day when I was heading to a meeting in Sierra Madre, she wanted me to go south on the 405 and I went north on the 405 and I heard about it from her for quite awhile until she got my new route organized. “Recalculating…” she kept saying.

After I got over being proud of myself for outsmarting her, it hit me that “recalculating” is what we do every time the light goes on and we realize that something we’d accepted as common wisdom or common practice really isn’t the way to go. We could think of a million examples: smoking was once thought to be glamorous, heaping salt on our food was considered no big deal, using racial slang to describe another person was just how it was. We’ve recalculated all that, haven’t we? We see the downside now. We count the cost. We’ve changed direction.

And I think we’re realizing that it’s time to recalculate, to change direction in how we talk to and about one another. We’ve figured out that words can hurt.

We’re certainly counting the painful cost of bullying and we’re working to lead kids in a new direction. Bullying behavior can be verbal, physical, emotional and cyber. It includes harassment, physical harm, repeatedly demeaning speech and efforts to ostracize another person. Bullying intends to make someone else feel inadequate or to belittle someone. Bullying is active, and is done with the intention of bringing another person down. Bullying can hurt deeply and has even driven some kids to take their own lives. We can stop it.

I know that several of you are already involved in anti-bullying work. Teachers, parents, folks here at our own Preschool, members of the Assistance League. This morning, we all thank you for this important, ground-breaking work.

Just this past week Hale Middle School in the Los Angeles Unified School District sponsored a day-long comprehensive multi-pronged program to battle bullying called “Stand Tall Day.” This is part of a nation-wide effort in schools and in cyberspace on bullying prevention. There was a workshop for parents on how to deal with cyber-bullying. One of the self-defense sessions for the kids had them simply holding out their arms and yelling “Stop!”

The day included presentations, videos, discussions, self-defense sessions and drama written by kids and performed for the kids at the school. One 14-year-old boy said that the scenes he wrote “were based on kids bullying because they’ve been bullied themselves, and sometimes it starts at home with parents…it’s like dominoes that keep falling, and it won’t stop until we make it stop.”

We’re choosing to change direction. We’re recalculating what’s OK and what’s not OK. And it’s working. One 13-year-old girl said that she found out after “Stand Tall Day” that someone who had bullied a fellow student went to him and apologized and asked to be friends. She said “I think this will change kids for the better.” And she’s right.
The same kind of recalculation can happen in the political sphere as well. About 10 days ago, a couple weeks after the horrendous shootings in Tucson in which Congresswoman Giffords was shot in the head at point blank range, a campaign consultant of a candidate for LA City Council sent an email to his staff saying that they would “put a political bullet” through the forehead of their opponent. The good news—he was fired and the candidate issued an apology to his opponent and his family. We can recalculate.

This is not a partisan thing at all. Congresswoman Giffords, now on the long road to recovery, is a Democrat. Several days after the shooting, the mayor Tucson, Bob Walkup, a Republican, drafted what he called a “civility accord” and presented it to the winter meeting of the U.S. Conference of Mayors. In an interview, Mayor Walkup said elected officials are “all human beings….so why don’t we shape up our..personal values and who we are as individuals, and let’s start there.”

The Civility Accord calls the mayors to “strive to understand different perspectives” and to choose words carefully.

The interviewer prodded him a bit asking if this wasn’t a bit like telling 12-year-old boys not to tell naughty jokes—it’s just what they do. Mayor Walkup was emphatic. “But they don’t have to. As a parent, you know, there comes a time in a parent’s life when you take your son aside and say…we’re not using bad language in this house. He said, but dad, you know, they say these words all the time at school. I said, not in this house.”

Mayor Walkup recalculated his own personal and family values long ago and now he’s applying them to political life. He said that mayors are on the front line with the public 24/7…and “this is a matter of the common good…If the mayors start doing it, maybe we can pass it to our commissions and committees that we have in the cities. So maybe we can take that to the nonprofits and maybe the faith-based organizations, and then maybe it’ll drive up to the state level and then swing over to the federal level….let’s be sure our priority’s right.”

As people of faith, we should join him. We should let our light shine and lead the way on this one. It’s in our DNA. The Scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments direct our attention to the vital importance about the quality and integrity of our relationships with one another. When Matthew has Jesus tell us in the verses we hear this morning “be reconciled with your brother or sister” he is building on the words of God recorded in Deuteronomy. “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendents may live.”

There are moments in the life of a people when a light shines, a door opens, moments when a significant recalculation becomes possible. We can choose a new path. Have we not been witness to this on the world stage as the people of Egypt have stood together for freedom and for a new future for their country? Christians and Muslims stood side by side in Tahrir Square in Cairo for 18 days, helping one another, supporting one another, praying together, working together for the common good. What
jubilation we have seen in their victory, and now we pledge to hold them in prayer in the challenging days ahead.

Heaven knows, for them, for us, for anyone who chooses to change direction, to create a new future, the changes required will not happen overnight or all at once. A sustained effort is required of us all on every level. The voice in our societal GPS will need to remind us over and over and over again: recalculate, recalculate, recalculate. Set aside your anger. Treat others with respect. Take the initiative in seeking reconciliation. Do not bear false witness against your neighbor.

Perhaps God is calling us to make this moment a time of what the rabbis call tikkun olam, Hebrew for “repairing the world.” A time of healing and restoration, a time for reconciliation and the building of new relationships, that we might be called, as the prophet said, “repairers of the breach and restorers of streets to dwell in.”

May the words of our mouths and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our salvation.

Amen.

Notes:

This children’s taunt was first listed in ‘Folk Phrases of Four Counties’ (1894) by G.F. Northall and is first attested in the United States in ‘Miss Lindsey’ (1936) by S.G. Gibbons

Carla Rivera, ‘Stand Tall Day’ seeks to battle bullying,” LA Times, February 9, 2011.

NPR Staff, “Tucson Mayor Urges Fellow Mayors To Be Civil,” January 22, 2011.

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