

Proper 19B 2018 Sermon by Linda Smith

September 16, 2018

[The thoughts of Father Mark, Father Richard Rohr and myself brought together this sermon. Those words found in the brackets are my contribution. -Linda Smith]

In today's Epistle reading, James writes (and I quote *The Message* translation):

A word out of your mouth may seem of no account, but it can accomplish nearly anything—**or** *destroy* it! It only takes a spark, remember, to set off a forest fire. A careless or wrongly placed word out of your mouth can do that. By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony to chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it, smoke right from the pit of hell. This is scary: You can tame a *tiger*, but you **can't** tame a tongue... The tongue runs wild, a wanton killer. With our tongues we bless God our Father; with the same tongues we curse the very men and women [God] made in his image. Curses and blessings *out of the same mouth!* My friends, this can't go on. A spring doesn't gush fresh water one day and brackish the next, does it?

What James is asking us to do is examine our own hearts. Jesus said, "what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart." (Matthew 15:18) "In order to be truly converted," writes Episcopal monk David Vryhof, "we must examine our intentions. **Why** am I tempted to speak in a hurtful way to this person? Where are these critical words coming from? ... How can I begin to change the way I think about this person or this situation? ...

"This descent into the heart is crucial because unless our **hearts** are converted we will never have much success transforming our **words** and our conversation...

"We cannot speak peaceful words if there is no peace in our hearts. We cannot offer life-giving words unless [we are aware of] the Divine life within us, ready to be offered to others. [Divine Love within us, strengthens us. When we realize God's unconditional love for us and all persons, we grow in compassion. It is then from a place of love that we speak.]

"...We need pure hearts in order to utter pure words. Which is why we will be working on this for the rest of our lives. Purifying our hearts is a continuous process [and what the spiritual journey is all about.] It involves opening our hearts to God day by day so that they can be transformed by Divine Love."²

[Because our judgments and commentaries, our thinking or expressing hurtful words, usually come to us daily and often several times a day, the process of opening our hearts requires that we discipline ourselves on a daily basis. A way to discipline ourselves away from behaviors that may be habitual is to have a practice. One practice that can be used is called Prayer of the Heart. This practice has been used since the time of early Christianity.]

****Practice: Prayer of the Heart***

Abba Poemen said, “Teach your mouth to say what is in your heart.” Many of the desert fathers and mothers, as well as the collected texts of the *Philokalia* in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, have described prayer as bringing your thinking down into your heart.

Love lives and thrives in the heart space. It [keeps you] from wanting to hurt people who have hurt [you]. [Awareness of our heart space and the love found there] [becomes the antidote for] obsessive, repetitive, or compulsive head games. It can make the difference between being happy and being miserable and negative. Could this be what we are really doing when we say we are praying for someone? Yes, we are holding them in our heart space. Do this in an almost physical sense, and you will see how calmly and quickly it works.

Next time a resentment, negativity, or irritation comes into your mind, and you want to play it out or attach to it, *move that thought or person literally into your heart space*. Dualistic commentaries [often negative and which separate us from God and others] are lodged in your head; but in your heart, you can surround this negative thought with silence. There it is surrounded with blood, which will often feel warm like coals. In this place, it is almost impossible to comment, judge, create story lines, or remain antagonistic. You are in a place that does not create or feed on contraries but is the natural organ of life, embodiment, and love. [This is your “sacred heart”, which is your deepest heart and God’s Heart too.]

[Because Prayer of the Heart is a *practice*, something you *experience* and choose to do in place of what is hurtful or negative, spoken or unspoken, let us quickly practice this prayer now:

So I invite you to:

- Close your eyes, if you are comfortable in doing so.
- Bring to mind someone who has or does irritate or annoy or even anger you in some way. This irritation could be something that occurs over and over or perhaps just the one time. Or bring to mind someone that you wish to avoid because they are a stranger to you, different than you, someone who threatens you because of their difference. This works best if it is someone you have had interaction with, but it can also work with the stranger on the street, who for no apparent makes you feel afraid. (pause)
- Now going from thinking about this person, move them to your heart. Place an image of this person in your heart. (pause)
- Allow the warmth found in your heart, the love in your heart, to surround this person. (pause)

- Notice as you do this what may come to mind. Perhaps it is a new understanding about this person – their needs, their fears, their lack in some way or even their gifts, and what they may need to hear from you. (pause)
- Again, take this new understanding to the place in your heart where you are holding this individual. Allow God’s love for this person to become your love. (pause)
- At this point you should experience that your fears and negativity are softened or relieved as you become more aware of God’s love for you and for everyone. (pause)
- Gently become present, one again, to where you are seated and to those around you. (pause)

This prayer practice can be very quick, done in the moment, or it can be experienced during daily prayer after an examen of your day. The point is to practice the prayer each day, so that it becomes a habit and something you do instead of spending your energy in negative and hurtful thinking, or worse, sharing negative or hurtful words.

So, who needs to be held in your heart? How can your words be life-giving?

It is God, who is closer than your own breath, who is your Heart of hearts, who can help you to tame your tongue.]

*(Adapted from Richard Rohr, [*Immortal Diamond: The Search for Our True Self*](#) (Jossey-Bass: 2013), Appendix D.)