

Choose Life, Choose Your Words, Choose Your Actions Then and Now

Deuteronomy 30:15, 19-20

Matthew 5:21-22, 36-37

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Words

“I love you.” Who has said those words to you?

Mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, husband or wife, or partner,
Boyfriend or girlfriend, friend, children?

Are you still waiting to hear someone say those words to you?

Have you said “I love you” to someone lately?

Who have you said those words to? Your husband, your wife, your mother or father,
Your kids, your grandparents, grandchildren...friend, partner? Dog, cat?

Do you find yourself saying “I love you” easily or are they hard words to say?

“I love you”

Three words, just words. There are times we want to hear someone say them
Time we need to say them

“I love you.” Just words. Maybe it matters more to us how
and when they are said and whether we believe the words.

Just words or are they?

“I hate you!”

Has someone said those words to you? Have you said those words to someone? Have you
said those words about someone?

I hate you. I hate him. I hate her. I hate them.

Just words or are they?

Words that express real anger and frustration.

When do you hear someone say these words?

When you read these words as a quote in the newspaper or hear someone on the radio or
read them online, how do we react?

Do the words affirm what we already feel about a person or a group of people?

What do you think when you read about web pages filled with words of hate toward a racial
ethnic group, toward a person

They are just words or are they?

A child can hear the words, “You are so stupid” and believe it and live as if it is true.
A young woman can hear the words “You are fat” and believe it and does everything, even dangerous things to make it not true.
A young man can hear words “You are wimp” and believe it and is ready to fight the next person who teases him to prove it’s not true.

As long as I can remember, I have been fascinated with words.

I remember learning to read and to read and how words starting leaping off the page as a story unfolded.

I studied English literature in college and pursued an English degree. Reading and hearing words of Shakespeare and his ability to transform words into timeless paintings of human experience of comedy and tragedy and romantic love was thrilling to me.

I took classes in rhetoric and was fascinated how people throughout history constructed words into persuasive speeches.

Both inspiring speeches, words that helped in that moment shape hope for movements for positive change for good

And speeches that persuaded with dangerous words, in cults and violent movements

I love to listen to people and to hear them put into words their life journeys and spiritual journeys, their experiences of feeling God’s presence, or divine love, words that describe close to God, to times of feeling in wilderness, to find words to express moments of great joy, and times of darkness and pain.

Words matter to me.

What are the bad words in your family or friend group? Are there certain words that are not allowed?

What about swear words? Are there times you use them and then trying to explain to your kids or grandchildren that they are never to say them but sometimes adults might blurt one out? Or do we use and hear these words so often we don’t even hear them anymore? I find myself most likely to swear when I am driving or reading the latest news out of Washington DC Do I hear an “Amen!”

Scripture

In this portion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes it clear that those who want to follow his ways, called into his community of disciples must learn not only to listen to the words God said, but also to take seriously what God meant.

God knows our hearts. God knows that our external behavior flows from our internal thoughts, decisions and feelings. So God wants to change, not only our external appearances, but the interior of our hearts and how we choose our words and actions.

Exegesis

These verses contain the first four of what are called “the six antitheses,” where Jesus will posit what has been said or written (from the law), and then answer with, “but I say to you ...”

The question that these antitheses collectively raise for me is “What does it mean to be faithful to the Scriptures?” Jesus’ radical re-formulation – with the words “You have heard ... But I say to you” – demonstrates that faithfulness to the Scriptures. In fact, Jesus treats the Scriptures, not as an ending point that “settles it,” but as a beginning point for re-forming the meaning of the text.

I would argue that Jesus is changing the emphasis from “the Scriptures,” as a noun, to “scripturing” as a verb – giving testimony to God’s real presence among God’s people. The accounts of creation, the Ten Words on Mt. Sinai, the stories of the people of Israel, Psalms, proverbs, prophetic utterances, and Jesus’ own words are all ways of “scripturing” God’s presence in differing times and contexts.

You have heard that it was said to the ancients, “You will not murder; and whoever might murder will be liable to the judgment.”

One of the 10 commandments.

But I say to you that each one who is angry toward his brother will be liable to the judgment; and whoever might say to his brother, “Raca!” will be liable to the Sanhedrin; and whoever says, “Fool” will be liable to the gehenna of the fire.

Raca Ῥακά is a term of contempt based on the Hebrew רק, denoting an empty, vain, worthless person. And Μωπέ is the vocative form of a fairly common term μωρός, meaning foolish. This is a public accusation of someone’s incompetence, as well as a public shaming that could be ruinous for someone’s life and family.

More antithesis

You have heard it said.... Do not commit adultery I say to you.... Do not look at a woman... as property

Do not give an offering to God at the altar if you are not on good terms with your brother

Choices about our words and our actions.

Today's lesson from the Hebrew scriptures and Sermon on the Mount speak of life and death, spiritually, emotionally, physically, and institutionally. Each moment is an opportunity for decision-making. Many paths are available, some leading to abundance and beauty, others to scarcity and ugliness.

Our choices are not just for ourselves. They shape our relationship to God and the world beyond us, including our own future. They can contribute to greater and lesser embodiment of divine values in the world. Indirectly or directly, our choices, our decisions and the decisions of our leaders can lead to life and death for people across the globe and can shape the future of generations we will never meet, especially as our decisions relate to planetary well-being and climate change. The choices of some of our leaders in promoting racist policies and dismantling of environmental policies mean we have important choices to make that counter those words and actions.

We need to see our path as relative and partial, and related to other healthy spiritual paths. We also need to remember that each of us brings different gifts to our faith communities.

The passage from the Sermon on the Mount invites us to synch our inner and outer lives. Beliefs and behaviors flow together. Our beliefs and values form our character and our reflected in our behaviors. Jesus' words describe spiritually healthy relationships. Spiritually healthy relationships lead to life abundant. They are grounded in the healing of inner life reflected in positive and life-supporting relationships.

Spiritual transformation is a matter of mindfulness or self-awareness in which we creatively respond to our emotional lives and past traumatic experiences so that we will not inflict our pain on others. Self-awareness involves a regular moral and spiritual inventory to determine where we have hurt others and to discern ways we can move from alienation to reconciliation.

The inner life is reflected in outer behavior, and outer behavior can be a matter of life and death in relationships and communities. Words matter and so do deeds. Self-talk, our inner dialogue, matters and so do the fruits of our inner lives.

Much of the current national malaise has emerged from acceptance of bullying, incivility, and denunciation of contrasting positions. Our inner anxieties can be manipulated political leaders, and then spill out into the national discourse rendering common ground difficult at best.

The scriptures counsel us to choose life, individually and corporately.

What does it mean for you to choose life in your relationships, your marriage...in our congregation...in our community...and for the planet? What do we need to say and do to go beyond self-interest to world-loyalty in an interdependent world?

To choose life is to choose beauty rather than ugliness for us and those whom we love.

Deuteronomy 30:15, 19-20 New Revised Standard Version

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.....I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving God, obeying and holding fast to God; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the Lord swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

Matthew 5:21-37 (selected verses) The Message

Jesus said, "You're familiar with the command to the ancients, 'Do not murder.' I'm telling you that anyone who is so much as angry with a brother or sister is guilty of murder. Carelessly call a brother 'idiot!' and you just might find yourself hauled into court. Thoughtlessly yell 'stupid!' at a sister and you are on the brink of hellfire. The simple moral fact is that words kill.

"This is how I want you to conduct yourself in these matters. If you enter your place of worship and, about to make an offering, you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right. Then and only then, come back and work things out with God....

"And don't say anything you don't mean. This counsel is embedded deep in our traditions. You only make things worse when you lay down a smoke screen of pious talk, saying, 'I'll pray for you,' and never doing it, or saying, 'God be with you,' and not meaning it. You don't make your words true by embellishing them with religious lace. In making your speech sound more religious, it becomes less true. Just say 'yes' and 'no.' When you manipulate words to get your own way, you go wrong."