

Sacred Words

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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“An alert human infant, at about one month of age, begins to build a vocabulary, making sense of the chaos of sound that bombards the senses. Addressed by another human being, the baby pays attention with its whole body, often waving arms and legs in response. One of the first signs that the child has begun to understand there to be a relation between the human face and the oddly pleasurable noises it makes, between the world of self and that of other people, is that it watches that face intently, especially the mouth. And it begins to move the tongue in and out of its own mouth in imitations, trying on the sound of speech, which at one month is well beyond its capabilities. But it is worth the effort, and the child will continue to try. An essential connection has been made; there are noises we share with others, sounds that are deserving of response.” (from *Amazing Grace* by Kathleen Norris)

There are noises we share with others, sounds that are deserving of response! Our essential connections are made through the sounds we make - the words we have created - to talk with each other. There are other ways by which we communicate, but it is with our words, our language, our poetry and our song, that we live out the deeper meanings of our human lives. It is in our connections, made in large part with our words, that we become fully persons, not merely human beings. These words we speak to each other are what make our lives. I call them sacred words.

According to Kabbalistic thought, God created the world by manipulating the signs and wonders that are now known as the Hebrew alphabet, until they descended like a vibrating river flowing down to earth. In another Jewish legend, “when God was about to create the world by His word, the twenty-two letters of the alphabet descended from [his] terrible and august crown ... whereon they were engraved with a pen of flaming fire. They stood round about God and one after the other spake and entreated, ‘Create the world through me!’” (*Legends of the Bible*, Louis Ginzberg)

The Dogon society of Africa considers words to be of two varieties, the dry and the moist. Dry, or primordial, words are attributed to the primeval Spirit, to unaware and undifferentiated speech. They are divine thought residing in human unconsciousness. Moist words, on the other hand, are the words given to human kind to speak. These words have the ability to germinate, like life itself. For the Dogon, just as light from the sun spirals down to take shape in the earth’s womb, so do our words spiral through the bodies of those who hear them to create new life.

This notion of the fertile word, carrying the seeds of creation, and seen as the first manifestation of God before any created form, is found in the cosmogonic concepts of many people around the world. The native people of Paraguay, for example, also believed that God created speech as the foundation of creation, before he gave physical form to water, fire, the Sun, to life-giving mists and lastly to primordial Earth.

And from the Gospel of John in the New Testament: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (John, 1:1)

In the Book of Genesis from the Hebrew Bible we are told: “So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man [called Adam] to see what he would call them, and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name.” In doing so, the God of the Hebrew Bible gave the power of the word to man. We’ll say the power of the word was given to women, too. One of the names for the Hebrew language is *sefat emet* which, literally translated, means “lips of truth.” According to the creation story of the Bible it is through God’s generosity that we humans have the ability to share in the ongoing process of creation through the power of words. Sacred words.

Words like the ones used in orthodox churches, right? Like righteousness, repentance, atonement, resurrection, eschatology, blood, fear, hell, grace. These are truly words worthy of religious veneration. Even the Unitarian Universalist tradition has its own set of sacred words: truth, search, reason, peace, respect, justice, service, love. These words help create an attitude of reverence and wonder. Sometimes sacred words are defined as those which are able to induce an experience of the divine. Chocolate, perhaps?

But what exactly is an experience of the divine and should it be something that only happens in church or meeting house or temple? I’m sure we would agree that the sacred, or the divine, or God, is most apparent to us in our connections, in those moments when we truly understand and feel our interconnections and mutual dependencies to everything around us, and to each other. And the primary way we find to express those connection is with words. Regular old words. Ones we might begin to think of as more than just ordinary when we consider their significance and the creative power they wield in our lives and in the world.

If words and language are our primary tool for describing the connections between ourselves and each other and the world, and if it is in those connections that we most experience the divine, then these sacred words we are using are more than just a little important. These are not just the sacred words of our religious institutions, these are the words of living, every bit as sacred, every bit as important, and every bit as powerful.

You may not have thought of them as sacred before, but I think the significance of words and language and communication is clear to all of us. Words come out of our mouths on our breath, often compared to the very spirit of our lives. With them we form a new creation every time. It can be scary to realize the importance and power of the words we speak to each other. We can influence others and the very future of the world just by the things we say. Just think about what happened when George Bush, without thinking about its historical context, used the word “crusade” in his description of the fight against terrorism.

As symbols, words have, by definition, a content greater than their form. On one level, the meaning of a word can be pretty much the same for everyone, but beyond that, as in our reading this morning, there is a level of meaning that will be different for each of us. How we hear a word is dependent on our individual history with that word or concept, as well as the

current state of mind with which we are listening. What one person says and what another person hears, may not necessarily be the same thing.

This is something a minister knows very well and something you may also have experienced from the point of view of the congregation. It is always something of a surprise to find out what little thing from one of my sermons someone remembers or that triggered either a good or a not so good response for a particular listener. Ralph Waldo Emerson had some interesting words about this phenomenon. He talks about the good ear or good listener, and the bad ear. “The good hearer is sure he has been touched sometimes, is sure there is somewhere to be reached and some word that can reach it. I am not ignorant,” Emerson continues on the topic of ministers and preaching, “that when we preach unworthily it is not always quite in vain. There is a good ear in some listeners that can draw supplies to virtue from very indifferent nutriment. There is poetic truth concealed in all the common places of prayer and sermon, and although foolishly spoken they may be wisely heard.” According to Emerson, there is also a bad ear in some people that can become so critical that it takes over one’s life and can become a person’s identity. When we are triggered to reaction by a certain word or concept it is almost like the blue, hypertexted, words on the Internet, that are, by a click of a mouse, connected to innumerable other sites or contexts. “The experience of preaching, the intersection on my life with [yours] on a given Sunday morning, is an exercise in humility.” (Kathleen Norris, p. 181, *Amazing Grace*)

We have all, in our lives, experienced the power of words. When did something that someone said to you make a difference or even stay with you till this day? I still remember a day in 9th grade algebra class, when my seemingly 90 some year old spinster teacher (Miss Warner) said to me (after listening to me talking to some friends before class), “Don’t wish your life away, Alison.” Such a simple thing. I doubt she knew these words would stay with me my whole life and make such a difference to me. But they have.

The influence and power of words can work in negative ways, too, as we all know. That is why thinking about the power of words is so scary. If everything that came out of our mouths automatically always had a positive effect, we could stop thinking before speaking. But it doesn’t work that way. Sometimes we misuse this power of the sacred word we have been given, either knowingly or, more often, unknowingly. You may say something, I may say something, and never know that those words caused hurt or doubt or confusion. Worse yet is when we say something on purpose and immediately regret that we cannot take it back. Our words are sort of like toothpaste. Once they are out of the tube, there is no putting them back.

Would that we could believe like Humpty Dumpty who said “When I use a word...it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.” Unfortunately, what words really mean is what someone else hears them to mean.

So what are some of the things we can do to facilitate good communication? Obviously we can think about what we say before we say it. That is the primary way in which we can use our words to their best creative potential. But given that our mouths sometimes fire up before our brains engage, I have another suggestion that would go a long way toward smoothing out relationships. It is something that too often seems lacking in our impatient society. I suggest

that we try also, as much as we are able, to listen with a forgiving ear. If we know how hard it is to always say the right thing, then there is no excuse for not giving others the benefit of the doubt in return. If you are offended, for example, take the time to ask if that's what the other person really meant. Or even just accept that this talking thing is hard and we all make mistakes sometimes. Let it go.

Even as a kid I would get very frustrated watching shows on TV, knowing that the whole plot was based on a misunderstanding that could have been avoided if the people involved had just talked to each other. What a simple solution. Talk to each other. I invite us, you and me, to always keep our lines of communication open.

If all life is a revelation of the divine and we experience it first hand through speaking to each other, then it is not only the mysterious words of religious esoterica that are sacred, it is all words. What we say to one another makes a difference. But how we listen to each other can make a world of difference.

My message this morning is simple. Speak these sacred words of ours with humility and love. And listen with a forgiving ear.