

May 20, 2007

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Words' Worth

I am sure that you have heard more than enough about the incident concerning Don Imus. After making insulting comments on his radio/television show "Imus in the Morning," he was fired by CBS. One of the voices demanding Imus' release was that of Reverend Al Sharpton who recently found himself in controversy for insulting comments he made on another show.

Interesting world in which we live. We have the right of free speech in this nation, but in the midst of that right we have become progressively coarser and more inflammatory in our use of language. Imus and Sharpton are not alone. They are just two of those who have most recently been exposed by their verbal gaffes.

We are so clear when others have crossed the line of acceptability, but our own tongue can get away from us and we tend to offer little reflection or remorse. The words we use have power, the question is, do they have value?

Prayer

I read an article once that stated if a person were to put in print all the words that person spoke in a year 53,000 pages would be filled. 53,000 pages! Now we all know that some of us are more loquacious than others, so say for example we counted the number of my words in a year, I might fill 60,000 pages or more! Be assured that I understand being very verbal does not equate to being highly articulate.

I saw a comic strip once where a boss was standing at the desk of a secretary and she is reading back to him what he had dictated to her. Checking to make sure she has written exactly what he said, the secretary says, "Now was that blah, blah, blah, or blah, blah, blah, blah?" I fear that if you were to draw a cartoon image of me, the little bubble above my head would have, "blah, blah, blah" in it or it might be like that character in the Peanuts television specials that has the "wha, wha, wha" sound of a horn when he speaks. We have so much verbiage in our lives, what is the benefit?

The Four Agreements is a little book written by Don Miguel Ruiz. Ruiz offers the reader some practical advice for living. The first wisdom Ruiz shares is, "Be Impeccable with Your Word." He writes, "The word is not just a sound or a written symbol. The word is the most powerful tool you have as a human."

Over and over again in scripture we are cautioned about the power of the words we use. Scripture has much to say about the use of our money and the use of our words. I realize that this concept is not rocket science, but rather more of a personal scan, a behavior check if you will.

Be Impeccable with your word. Make your words count. Intentionally reach for words that encourage, words that build up yourself and others, words that put positive energy into the atmosphere. The word impeccable is Latin in origin. Pecatus is Latin for the English word, "sin."

The i-m before pecatus means without. Becoming impeccable with our word invites us to be without sin with our words. Being sinless means rooting our lives in the grace of Christ and allowing grace to shape our words. Grace as the foundation for our self talk, the thoughts and words that define our self and grace that shapes our words with God and one another.

In the Gospel of Matthew we hear these words 12:36-37. Read the passage. “Words are powerful. Take them seriously.”

Be Impeccable with your word. We are called to be without sin in our speech leading us to words of grace, words of hope, words of blessing. A tall order for most of us.

About ten years ago, Joseph Telushkin wrote a book entitled, *Words that Hurt; Words that Heal*. Since then he has been sought after on the lecture circuit. He often asks his audiences if they can go for 24 hours without saying any unkind words about or to anybody. I will not ask for a show of hands to commit to that concept, but think about it. Can you, can I, live 24 hours without criticizing or judging ourselves or others?

In the last several days, I had several bad moments behind the wheel of my car. I do not know why but last week, one driver after another tried to run into me. It is amazing how patient I am when I make a mistake behind the wheel; when I do not see the other driver, I always have a good excuse, but I have no patience when another driver makes a mistake and if that driver is driving poorly while talking on the phone, I am ruthless. But of course, I am justified because the other driver is in the wrong!

Most of us can find justification for our negative words. The other person deserves our negativity, our criticism. The reality is once we create a pattern of negativity, it can begin to influence the person we are becoming. Over time, that negative attitude is reflected on a regular basis in our words.

How many harsh words have been spoken this morning? How many critical thoughts and words have we already shared? How often do we allow negative thinking to move into our speech patterns?

If words are the messengers of the heart, then those negative thoughts we have, those negative words we speak grow from the center of our being: the heart. The heart is that place at the core of our being that shapes our thoughts, our words and our actions.

In the Hebrew tradition there is a word for negative speaking. Lashon ha-ra relates to the sharing of information that lowers the status of another. It is accurate information, but it is negative information. Unlike slander, what is said is true, but not flattering. I am reminded of wisdom from the Disney production of Bambi, “If you can’t say something nice don’t say nothing at all.” Lashon ha-ra is using words that are damaging to another. Impeccable it is not. Lashon ha-ra is the sin of taking negative information and sharing that information in hopes of demeaning another. Most often we commit this act behind the back of the subject. The person demeaned is not present because none of us want to be held accountable for lashon ha-ra. None of us want to be held accountable for words that we know are not grace full, words that may be great gossip, but not uplifting.

I have a favorite rabbinical tale. I have told it before and I am sure that I will tell it again. It speaks loud and clear to me.

There was a man who lived in a small village who made a daily practice of speaking negatively about the village rabbi. He would criticize the rabbi to anyone and everyone who would listen. Some of what he said was true of the rabbi and some of what he said was pure slander. Day after day, the man put his negativity into his conversations.

One day, the man was struck by remorse. Imagine that. Day after day, he slanders another man and after time it finally dawns on him that he is wrong. So, he goes to the rabbi and asks for his forgiveness. Offering to do anything to make amends, the man is sent by the rabbi to find a feather pillow. Then the rabbi asks the man to go to the highest point in the village, cut the pillow open and scatter the feathers into the wind. The man slashes open the pillow and carefully empties the feathers into the wind. The feathers take flight and are carried off by the wind. The man makes sure that every feather is lifted into the air before he returns to the rabbi. The man then asks the rabbi, "Am I now forgiven?" The Rabbi replies, "Not quite. Now go and collect the feathers."

Be impeccable with your words because as the scripture states, they can come back and haunt you.

In this age of tabloid magazines, internet communication and tabloid television, we are surrounded by innuendo and downright slander. In our music, our news, our communication in general, much is said that may or may not be accurate. In our present media environment we have created a climate where being careless with our words is acceptable.

In an article by Devin Leonard in the November 1st 2004, issue of Fortune Magazine, Leonard wrote these words about an American tabloid newspaper, "Star sells the vast majority of its copies on the newsstand, and the quickest way to boost those sales is to abandon good taste."

What is it in us that as a culture we delight in demeaning others? Our delight is what keeps the tabloids afloat. It is how millions are made each week. We love to hear about a celebrity in rehab or divorce court or jail. We have some sad need to get the dirt on others with little or no concern as to the truth. We have become a culture that tries people in the media long before they have their day in court. We leap to assumptions and then repeat them. We are a culture that will send hype into the world of email or internet with no concern to the consequences in the life of the one maligned.

The first amendment gives us the right to freedom of speech, the right to speak openly and freely, but we have taken that right beyond its intent. It is past time to lean into the wisdom of our faith.

Earlier in the passage that I read from Matthew, Jesus himself experienced slanderous remarks. Jesus heals a man and the people who were present respond, "This has to be the Son of David!" The religious leaders, however, offered a more cynical explanation – Jesus was practicing magic. In the passage, Jesus goes on to speak to the slander and then begins the teaching on the importance of our words.

We are so intentional about developing our intellect. Imagine what might be if we spent the same time and effort that we give to expanding our education to expanding the capacity of our heart.

Our words are first formed in our hearts. What is in your heart? Are you cultivating a heart of grace or a heart of lashon ha-ra. Are you impeccable with your word or like me is there some work to be done to make that our reality?

This is the first day of what can be a magnificent week. We can start with 24 hours of speaking only positive words. We can choose to speak without negativity and criticism for a day. When we get through 24 hours will we continue for 36 hours and then 48 hours? Might we focus on the developing a heart of faith that will shine through our thoughts and our words?

A resolution was presented to the United States Senate in the mid 1990s by Senators Connie Mack, a Republican from Florida, and Joseph Lieberman, then a Democrat from Connecticut. The resolution was entitled "National Speak No Evil Day." Imagine that 24 hours of being impeccable with our word as a national reality. For 24 hours, no child would have to withstand bullying at school, no person would be traumatized by words of hate, no slander, no lashon ha-ra. For 24 hours all in this nation would be impeccable with their words. It was a resolution calling on the citizens of this nation to enjoy a day free of cruel jokes, malicious gossip and character assassination. What a day that could be!

There is great wisdom in scripture about the use of our words. Though we often spend time with our children to help them become impeccable with their words, it seems to me that we need a personal check as adults now and again to make sure we have not become complacent with our own words; to make sure that our words have worth, that they bring value to our interactions. It is within the heart, not the dictionary, that we find the ultimate meaning to our words. I pray we find that our 53,000 pages of words this year are far more inspired, far more compassionate, far more grace full than blah, blah, blah.