

Open Ears, Open Hearts, Open Season
 James 1:19-27, 2:1-10 Mark 7:31-37
 September 6, 2009 J. S. O'Neill

James 1:19 - 2:10 *You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; for your anger does not produce God's righteousness. Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls. But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing. If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.*

2:1 *My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favoritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Have a seat here, please," while to the one who is poor you say, "Stand there," or, "Sit at my feet," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters. Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonored the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you? You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.*

Mark 7:31-37 *Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. They brought to him a deaf man who had an impediment in his speech; and they begged him to lay his hand on him. He took him aside in private, away from the crowd, and put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue. Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, "Ephphatha," that is, "Be opened." And immediately his ears were opened, his tongue was released, and he spoke plainly. Then Jesus ordered them to tell no one; but the more he ordered them, the more zealously they proclaimed it. They were astounded beyond measure, saying, "He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak."*

James Russell Lowell, 19th century American poet and diplomat, suggested this

addition to the Beatitudes: “Blessed are they who have nothing to say and cannot be persuaded to say it.” Think for a moment of the last time you were involved in a conversation that made a difference in your life. Think, too, about the last time you self-consciously and with intention said something that expressed your deep faith and hope and challenged the hopelessness and faithlessness of another.

A man returning from church one Sunday morning was asked by his wife what the preacher had to say in his sermon. “Nothing!” he snapped, “For thirty minutes!” “You may not need to hear this,” said a very agitated man to me one day, “but I need to say it!” At least he was honest, but I wondered, after he had vented, if everything we have to say is something we have to say? Is it something others need to hear? More importantly, is it a good word, a hopeful word, something that witnesses to God’s presence in our lives? Or is it just so much verbal camouflage, words which help us blend in with the landscape, indistinct and bland.

The story is told of an acquaintance of Winston Churchill saying to him, “You know, Sir Winston, I don’t think I’ve ever told you about my grandchildren.” Churchill clapped the man on the back and said, “I realize it, my dear fellow, and I can’t tell you how grateful I am!” We are *homo loquens*, the human creature that speaks. It is not clear that we use the gift wisely or well.

We are all conspirators in filling the world’s ears with words, words, words, relatively few of them saying what anyone else needs to hear. The rabble-rousing talking heads on television whose words are chosen not for the sake of truth but for the sake of sharpening division and deepening ignorance; the hysteria shouted at town meetings where selfish fear trumps the common weal; the fawning babble heaped upon celebrity; the feint and dodge and infinite parsing of political positioning.... Nothing becomes speech until it has already been shaped by our needs and wants, our ideologies and prejudices, our fears and anxieties and hesitations. Would that other filters were in place before open season is declared: that of modesty, that we not confuse our opinion with truth; that of openness, that if we claim the right to declare we must give the same right to others; that of love that we always speak and listen with the heart of Jesus. What a difference there between talk that builds up, as opposed to talk that tears down, talk that is creative versus talk that merely fills the silences, talk that calms and encourages reflection as opposed to talk that rages, manipulates, demeans, or destroys, and talk that is forgiving, as opposed to talk that seems to follow the logic of an eye for an eyelash.

Regarding the bombastic, no-holds-barred, distemper of our times, someone has described it as Shakespearean where, at the end of the play, one side wins and there are lots of bodies on the floor. Would that we would be less Shakespearean and more Chekovian in our approach where, at the end of the play, no one wins and everyone is a bit disappointed. Why not dialogue instead of diatribe? Why conflict instead of conversation?

Nothing is more precious than the right word at the right time. Are we holding up our end of the conversation? “May I have a Word with you?” the Spirit of God says, “A word about what your life is expressing as you make your choices, a word about what values and visions you are revealing by the way you live, a word about where your

priorities lie and about what you seem to be saying your precious life's time and energy are for."

"Blessed are those who have nothing to say and cannot be persuaded to say it," indeed. But we are disciples of Christ. We are the church. We have something to say. What's going to persuade us to say it? And what's going to persuade us to act upon it, for our actions may far exceed our vocabularies in eloquence. That's what the Letter of James is concerned with, whether we do what we say and whether we are saying anything of value. Do we build up or do we destroy by our words; do we heal or do we wound; do we teach a faith to live by or do we merely contribute to one another's confusion and doubt?

A closed mouth gathers no foot, as the saying goes, but by keeping silent we create a vacuum where no good news of forgiveness and grace, no word of hope, no explicit confidence in faith is spoken, and this leaves the field to the shouters, the obfuscators, the employers of manipulative and deceitful cant. Talk can be cheap, as we know, but the good news of grace can become so rare on the lips of Christians, it seems no fortune can buy it. Christians must speak gracious words, and gracious deeds must follow them lest our words seem empty. Faith must not be devoted to merely wishing people well, but making them well.

Consider the story of Jesus and the deaf man. On one level, it tells of a healing of a physical problem. On a deeper level, it is a parable of the power of grace to penetrate the life of one previously closed to the love of God. The means by which he was healed was the word and deed of Jesus. And that, my friends, must be our model for ministry, to share with our children, our friends, and the world the words and deeds of Jesus.

A reporter asked a Hollywood starlet to state her political thoughts. "How do I know what I think until I hear what I have to say?" she said. Well, how do we know what we believe until we speak to one another about our faith, until we act upon the promises of our faith and find them true? How can we move ahead in our work in the church until we hear expressed the faithful dreams and visions of each member of the community? How can we investigate the dimensions of faith if we are not engaging in conversation with the world's need?

Control our tongues? Yes, control them, and focus them, so that what makes them articulate is the good news of Jesus Christ. The church should be providing something like those immersion experiences in foreign language study where the only language spoken is the one the student is trying to learn. Here in church each of us is a student and a teacher, each is a speaker and a listener, each is obliged to articulate what is said and what is done that we trust Christ, that we are people of the Word.

Long ago God initiated a conversation with us, and God's Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. Do we speak the language? Is it the content of what we have to say? For a disciple of Jesus, speaking no news is to fail to speak the Good News. No Good News from you is a crisis for your neighbor; no Good News from First Presbyterian Church is bad news for our community and our world. Is grace sitting silent on our tongues, inert in our deeds? Is sacrificing for the truth a foreign phrase? Are healing and generosity slogans but not policy? We have been

addressed by the Word of Life, and Christ is awaiting an answer.