

Pentecost 17, Proper 19
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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Rev. Paul Moore

The Power of the Word

I've written some poetry in my day, but I'm no Amanda Gorman. At the Democratic National Convention, she delivered another masterpiece. Called, "The Hill We Climb," this verse stood out to me.

"Only now, approaching this rare air are we aware
that perhaps the American dream is no dream at all, but instead a dare to dream together."

And here's another gem:

"We are one family regardless of religion, class, or color
for what defines a patriot is not just our love of liberty, but our love for one another."

As a poet, she understands what the writer of the Epistle lesson from James understood. He says, "Not many of you should become teachers, because you will be judged more strictly." Then he goes on to his famous passage about the tongue. Words, my friends, words are that human capacity to launch power into the air. Teachers should be aware, and wary of just how they use their words. "Better to be judged a fool," said my father, "than to open one's mouth and remove all doubt."

Now, I am not of the opinion that language is restricted to the human species, but human language is what we know. Words make up so much of how we communicate that they must never be taken lightly. "I never meant to say that," always leaves lingering doubts. Misspeaking is misspoken is mistaken is misbegotten.

Then there is the justice of language. There is no one universal human language, any more than there is one universal human culture. Language is the primary symbol system for a culture, embodying its heart and soul, the medium by which members share their culture's deepest movements and broadest values. A Polish saying tells us that to learn a second language is to earn a second soul. What language we speak, therefore, includes and excludes.

My mother knew that deep in her heart. In the trilingual world we lived in, she had a hard-and-fast rule. English was by far the minority language. We only spoke English in the house when everyone in the house understood English. When the language of the dominant is the only one allowed, those who have a different soul are cast aside. Those

of us with more than one soul have an even greater responsibility for justice.

It would be easy to hide behind the illusion that not all of us are teachers, as the passage would imply, but that is to miss the Gospel's lesson today. Peter gives words to what the disciples know: Jesus is the Messiah, the Holy One of God. But even Peter does not fully comprehend the meaning of his own words. He thinks only of political freedom from the oppression of Rome. Jesus speaks to a much deeper allegiance. Messiahship is not leadership in a political war of independence. It is leadership in a struggle for the heart and soul of the world. Jesus helps him and other listeners understand. If they are to use the word "Messiah" for Jesus, then they need to be ready take their own word seriously.

Yesterday a number of us were at the consecration of the Rt. Rev. Phillip LaBelle as the ninth bishop of the Diocese of Olympia. A lot of words were said. The core of it, however, came in the words of our Presiding Bishop when he said,

Therefore?Father?make.Phillip.a.bishop.in.your.Church;Pour.out.upon.him.the.
power.of.your.princely.Spirit?whom.you.bestowed.upon.your.beloved.Son.Jesus.
Christ?with.whom.he.endowed.the.apostles?and.by.whom.your.Church.is.built.up.in.
every.place?to.the.glory.and.unceasing.praise.of.your.Name;

I do not know what Phillip felt at that moment, but when similar words were said over me in my ordination to the priesthood, I felt like fire fell from heaven. I have not always lived up to my priestly calling with my words, and neither will he, but we strive to do our best. We heard words, we believed words, and we gave our word.

Words form an enormous part of the work of a bishop. Bishops are chief pastors and liturgists for the Diocese. When I need a pastor, I have one—the bishop. When we need confirmations, receptions, blessings of baptismal fonts and a bunch of other things, the bishop comes to do those things. Liturgies approved for use here cross the bishop's desk. I work here at the discretion of the bishop.

Bishops are our point of unity with the wider Episcopal Church. They gather with the other bishops of the Episcopal Church in the House of Bishops, one house of our two-house governance system. They issue pastoral letters, make big decisions and guide the church. Between sessions of the General Convention that takes place every 3 years, they are our primary link to the rest of the Episcopal Church. When clergy change dioceses, those negotiations include the bishops.

Bishops are our chief speakers in our relationships with the Anglican Communion

worldwide and a symbol of that unity. They gather with Anglican bishops from around the Anglican Communion, and are central to establishing partnership relationships with dioceses outside our church. They are our link to that great family of national churches who are all in communion with the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Bishops are casters of vision, inspirers of action and gatherers of people. As head of this Diocese of Olympia, we will look to the Rt. Rev. Phil LaBelle to work with us to cast a vision for the next decade. He will call us into conversation, guide that conversation and then steer our journey into the vision cast. All of that involves words—words that matter.

Words are powerful!

"Make him a bishop in your church"

"Make them a priest in your church."

"Make them a deacon in your church."

Make them a Christian people in your world.

How about your words? In the 10 commandments, the 4th one is about not taking the Lord's name in vain. Think about it. This is the same God who created the world by a word. This is the same God whose Son, Jesus the Christ, St. John's Gospel calls the Word. If we are not to take this God of Words' name in vain, how about all the other words we speak? The writer of Ephesians admonishes us, "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." The psalmist prays, "Set a guard, Lord, over my mouth; Keep watch over the door of my lips."

For the Christian, there are no glib words, for we know the power of the word. This is why gossip is so destructive and praise so constructive. This is why "Thank you" means so much. This is why a kind answer can turn away wrath, as the book of Proverbs tells us. Your words can destroy, but they can also build up.

Love one another with your words. Make them medicine to heal and restore the world.