

Matthew 5:21-24; First Corinthians 13; Luke 4:16-21 "SPEAKING THE WORD, BUT NOT the word " by Betty Edson

This morning, I want to speak "the Word" (with a capitol letter) to you, but not "the word" (in lower case). Actually, it would be fair to say that I am PLAYING with words here! Please let me try to explain. Three years ago, after the Newtown tragedy, a Task Force on Gun Violence was formed by the Vermont Conference. That's the lower case word to which I refer - "gun," - as in gun violence - and it is my intention not to say that word again in this sermon! But, by God's grace, I do want to speak the Word, with a capitol letter.

The Task Force consisted of four people who met several times and pulled together many helpful and pertinent resources on the issue, which can still be found through a link on the Conference website. Since that time, December of 2012, we have lost, in our nation according to The Guardian newspaper, 90,000 people, as a result of this kind of violence. So it would be fair to say that not much has changed; that little progress has been made in solving this complicated problem; and I presume this is why our group was contacted by the Conference Department of Mission, recently, to ask if we would be willing to resurrect the Task Force. I should note that this was BEFORE the most recent tragedy in Orlando. Those of us who felt we could still do so convened and brainstormed. Had the materials we had gathered been used? Is there general concern about this issue, or is it only on the minds of a few? What could we possibly do that might inspire those who are concerned to action?

Well, we decided to move ahead on several fronts, but we did have consensus among us that there is an underlying problem that needs to be dealt with before much is going to happen, in this regard, in our church families. And that is what I'm trying to address in this sermon. I believe that, even in some of our most vibrant and active churches, we have forgotten how to talk with each other. This problem is seen in two forms. In some unfortunate, and, I like to think, rare instances, people speak to one another in unkind and judgmental ways; in other more prevalent instances, it is not a case of anger being expressed in words that are hopefully later regretted; it is a case of not talking - period. "Everyone in our church gets along so well," we say, and I am certainly grateful to be part of a church where that is true. I consider that a huge blessing in my life. But whenever we give thanks for that very special blessing, I think we need to ask ourselves, "What do we mean when we say that? Do we mean that we all bring a smile on our face, when we come to church, and that we welcome all comers, and that, in coffee hour, we ask how the children or the aging parents of our fellow members are? And does it mean that we lend support to those going through tough times? Surely it means that, and I surely do not mean to minimize the importance of that; it is no small thing. But if we are really going to speak the Word, with a capitol letter, we need to find a way to take one more step. If we are going to empower ourselves, as church, by

God's grace, to work toward bringing God's peace and justice into the world, then we need to learn to talk about subjects that are controversial in a healthy way. And I'm not convinced we do that well.

Clearly that is not something that happens as much as it should in our culture. One need only watch certain talk shows or watch certain political debates or overhear certain conversations to know this. At least twenty years ago, Curt Minter, who was at that time our Conference Minister, said something that really stuck with me in that regard. He said that the church just may be the last best possibility for providing a respectful forum on controversial issues. I have come to believe that, were we to act on that, we would be doing something incredibly powerful; that it might even turn out to be the needed yeast that would bring more civility into our strained democracy and the wider culture of our nation.

Let's think a little about the scripture lessons I chose. We might say that the verses from Matthew are Jesus' instruction in this regard. He is talking about how we know in our hearts when things are not as they should be between ourselves and others. Jesus is talking about situations that tend to build walls between us, and his answer is basically that we need to have a constructive one-on-one with someone when we see that happening. "If you are about to offer your gift to God at the altar," he said, "and there you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar, go at once and make peace with your brother or sister and then come back and offer your gift to God." I don't know about you, but that's part of why I go to church! I find it's much easier to sit in judgement and/or feel aggrieved, when I'm sitting at home in my living room, than when I'm in church and being intentional about looking around at my church family friends. There I find myself thinking, "You know I do get annoyed by so-and-so sometimes, but I need to remember all the good and kind things I know about him or her." Jesus doesn't suggest that we yell at the other person or malign him or her, but he definitely does not suggest either that we pretend there's not a problem! What he advises is that we work honestly on our relationship with that person.

It doesn't always work. There have certainly been times in my life, when after a serious try or two at having a good conversation about something that is causing tension or strain, I've said to someone, "You know. I love you, but I think we've both shared with each other how we feel about whatever the subject is, and it looks like neither of us is going to change our mind, so probably we should just agree to disagree," But if we make it a priority to learn more about civil discourse, I think we will be surprised to discover that many times, we will end up, not agreeing entirely, but realizing that there is some common ground on which we can agree.

The passage from First Corinthians 13 offers some suggestions about civil discourse. Loving communication, it says, is undergirded with patience and kindness; it is not self-

centered or bullying, and it relies on the truth. Basically, the passage affirms that Christian communication needs to be totally infused with love.

The last passage, the one from Luke, I always think of as Jesus' Mission Statement. He's just been in the desert for forty days, struggling with the temptation to do other than that to which he's been called, and this is his first sharing with the public, you might say, as to what he sees as his call and that he is determined to answer 'yes' to that call. He wants to proclaim liberty to those who are oppressed and bring good news to the poor and to heal people. And it's our calling, as well. The main thing I am hoping to convey this morning is that regarding the lower case word for which our Task Force was convened and regarding many other hot-button words, there are some practical and necessary things we can do, other than tear our hair and say, "Oh, dear, there's so much we could do, but taking such steps just wouldn't go over in our church."

Here are a few. Our church, since an incident right after the Newtown tragedy, which DID raise the kind of uncomfortable conversation or lack of same about which I've been speaking, has been working on some guidelines for discussion. The guidelines were approved by our Church Council this past spring, and were first used at our recent Annual Meeting. It is our hope that we will read them in church committees at least once a year, when there is a changing of the guard; and we will read them before meetings that seem to offer the possibility of controversy.

They are adapted from the Sojourners Peace and Civility Pledge and the Charter for Compassion, and I share them with you now.

"Our faith compels us to engage the world, to discuss and act on the pressing issues of our day, always with an eye toward bringing justice to our community and world. To that end, we welcome opportunities for study and reflection that bring a variety of perspectives to the table. We commit that our dialogue with each other will reflect the spirit of the scriptures, which tell us, in relating to each other, to be "quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry," (from the book of James) "and we pledge that when we disagree, we will do so respectfully, without judging the other's motives, attacking the other's character, or questioning the other's faith. We will be mindful of our language, being neither arrogant nor boastful in our beliefs, as we strive to "be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love." (that last from Ephesians).

It is my hope and prayer that, sometime in the near future, the Peace and Justice Committee that I chair will offer a discussion on a controversial subject, and that these guidelines will allow it to be a time - not when everyone at the end says, "Oh, of course, why didn't we see this before? We all agree!" but a time when people leave with more understanding of other points of view and maybe having collectively discovered a point or two on which there is now agreement.

At the Norwich Church, when an uneasy moment arose, again after the Newtown tragedy, the pastor had two people who were not seeing eye to eye, write down their views and concerns in a constructive way, and she then incorporated these into a litany, which was used in Sunday worship, in which the two people led the litany, sometimes reading their own thoughts and sometimes reading the thoughts of the other person. I am told this was both powerful and effective for all concerned.

I am aware of churches that have offered two or three session workshops on Non-Violent Communication, which have been well-received, and which have inspired some members to really try to learn more and to use these skills in their personal lives. As a project, after attending a week-long Peace Intensive, sponsored by the National Peace Academy several years ago, I created a four-session course, called Building Peace, One Step at a Time. In the fourth session, we talk about activism, but in the other three, we are basically talking about loosening up emotionally and about various communication tools that are available to us. I'd be glad to do that at your church, or to share the materials with any group that wanted to give it a try.

I'm sure there are many, many other ways of moving ourselves and our congregations along this path. Both on the issue which inspired this sermon, and on many other red flag issues that come to mind, when we think seriously about what God, through Jesus, calls us to do, there are so many actions we can take. Actions like writing letters, signing petitions, demonstrating, reading books that raise our consciousness; and, for the truly committed, even civil disobedience, but I don't think we will make a lot of progress along this road, until and unless we make progress in communication.

Part of what blocks this is the reality that many people of faith will say that religion and politics don't mix, so we shouldn't "talk politics" in church. If we're talking about partisan politics, I couldn't agree more. But that passage from Luke is a clear call to work for peace and justice, and that, it seems to me, does bring secular issues into the "religious" arena.

Many years ago, when I was first a member of the Norwich Church, a Social Justice committee was suggested. 1955, maybe? And that's just what people said, including, I'll bet, me. What do we mean by social justice? I think it might be helpful, in that regard, for me to share with you a modern-day parable that helps us understand the difference between charity and justice.

A young couple was enjoying a picnic beside a river on a lovely summer day. All of a sudden, someone came down the river, clearly in trouble, and flailing. The young man immediately jumped into the river and rescued this person. No sooner had he caught his breath than a second person came down, yelling for help.

This happened five times in a row, and at that point, the young man said to his companion, "You stay here and keep doing this; I'm going upstream to see what's going on."

Charity is doing something to alleviate suffering that's right in front of our eyes, and, as the church, this is something we do really well. Food Shelves, Homeless Shelters, Christmas baskets, helping after floods and fires. It is a crucial and important part of what it means to be the church. Justice, on the other hand, is going upstream to see what has caused the suffering. Asking the question - Why are people hungry? Why are people homeless? Are we doing something that's exacerbating all these floods and wildfires? If so, what could we do to change that? And this also is a crucial and important part of what it means to be the church, but it's a much tougher sell, mainly, I think, because of this misconception about politics and religion. Does partisan politics belong in the church.? Absolutely not. But given God's call to us to work for peace and justice, serious discussion of such issues, including the issue which inspired this sermon, and collective action when there is consensus? To me, it seems a given.

All of us yearn for peace, and when we come right down to it, we know that we will never have real peace, until there IS justice. I'd like to close with what Fred Buechner wrote about that kind of peace. "Peace has come to mean the time when there aren't any wars or even when there aren't any major wars. Beggars can't be choosers; we'd most of us settle for that. But in Hebrew peace, shalom, means fullness, means having everything you need to be wholly and happily yourself. One of the titles by which Jesus is known is Prince of Peace, and he used the word himself in what seem at first glance to be two radically contradictory utterances. On one occasion he said to the disciples, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." And later on, the last time they ate together, he said to them, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." The contradiction is resolved when you realize that for Jesus peace seems to have meant not the absence or struggle, but the presence or love."

There you have it. Eventually we definitely need to be able to say those lower case words that are like red flags being waved, but before we even try to do that, we need to speak the Word; by listening to the words of the Word Made Flesh, the word which would have us learn to carry out serious conversations, with love and respect for all involved, seeking not to persuade, so much as to learn from each other and find common ground. May we continue to struggle, but always undergirded by the presence of love.