

Let us pray.
O God of Love, O God of Truth;
Let us say strong things gently and gentle things strongly.
Let us speak the truth in love to all
and love the truth that lives in each.
Let us hear the truth as we each need it and live that truth.
O God, we heed it through Jesus; Your Word & our Lord.
Amen.

How Free Should Our Speech Be?

Isaiah 6:5 ff

“I am one of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips, yet my eyes have seen the Lord of hosts. Then the angel flew to me carrying a live burning coal taken from the altar..and touched my mouth with it and said, Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed...”

Matthew 12:31ff

“Therefore I tell you, people will be forgiven of every sin...but blasphemy against the (Holy) Spirit will not be forgiven. Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. Either a tree makes good fruit or bad fruit...You brood of vipers (Jesus said to the Pharisees) How can you speak good things when your hearts are filled with evil. For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks...By your words you will be justified or condemned...”

James 3:2 ff

“Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect and able to keep their personhood in control. It’s like a bridle in a horses mouth to make him obey. Or like ships: they are so large and it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a small rudder to steer where the pilot wishes...How great a forest fire is set ablaze by a small fire! Well, the tongue is like a small fire placed among the people of faith...to set fire on the whole cycle of nature...”

Isn't it interesting
that of all the sins humanity perpetrates
the only one deemed "unforgivable"
has to do with speech.

Think about that. Think of all the detestable, heinous,
hurtful, victimizing, brutal, unjust behaviors
we humans have done,
and yet, the one action that Jesus deems unforgivable
is about our speech.

*"Therefore I tell you, people will be forgiven of every sin...
but blasphemy against the (Holy) Spirit will not be forgiven."*

Before I unpack the idea of "blasphemy",
let's consider generally, the power of speech.
We live in an age of so many words
from so many directions by so many people
that the power of speech has become diluted, devalued
and reckless.

The radio-jockey Alex Jones,
who was just fined millions of dollars
for perpetuating hurtful lies
about the Sandy Hook School murders,
is learning that speech has a cost - it isn't free!

Jones' defense was "freedom of speech"
and the case of those parents of those dead children
was "defamation". Which is right?

Free Speech or True Speech?
Free speech or loving speech?
Free speech or faithful speech?

The birth of Christianity took place
in the cradle of this debate.

In the 1st C. many Christians were jailed
because of their public preaching.

Some were killed - thrown to the lions.

The bible tells us that when the courts
threatened Peter, warning him to preach no more
he declared to them,

*“Whether it is right to obey you, God will judge,
but I cannot keep from speaking what I believe.”* (Acts 4:20)

But then, as Christianity matured,
freedom of speech was handcuffed in the age of heresies.
And to this day, certain branches of Christianity
ex-communicate and shun free-thinkers & free-speakers
for questioning church doctrine.

Here in America freedom of speech & freedom of faith
started hand-in-hand.

Back in England,
from whence many of our forebears came
there was NOT free speech.

John Bunyan, famed author of *Pilgrims Progress*,
was jailed for his public preaching.

In 1654, Catholic, John Southworth, was executed
because he wouldn't stop preaching.

So to avoid all that, our founding parents
crafted a constitution that protected freedom of speech
more than any other nation in history.

But over the years,
with each egregious abuse of this freedom,
this freedom has shrunk.

Nowadays, certain "Hate speech" is illegal.

Public defamation of a person's character is illegal.

Obscenity and child pornography are illegal.

Plagiarism is illegal.

And of course it is not legal to

"shout 'fire' in a crowded theater".

Said Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes in this case

"when words are used (in public)

to create a clear & present danger of violence"

that is not what our constitution protects.

Justice Holmes was thinking along the lines of James,
the brother of Jesus.

The Epistle of James is a great treatise on the power of
speech and words.

*"Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect
and able to keep their personhood in control.*

He goes on to write,

It's like a bridle in a horses mouth to make him obey.

Or like ships: they are so large and it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a small rudder to steer where the pilot wishes.

How great a forest fire is set ablaze by a small fire!

Well, the tongue is like a small fire among the people of faith."

James was not speaking legally,

he was speaking faithfully.

He believed in the sacred power of words.

Holy Scripture taught him that words were holy.

God created the world with "Word".

Wisdom guided the world with her "Word".

And Jesus was called "The Word of God".

And this brings us to "Blasphemy".

Blasphemy is a word that feels archaic to us - maybe even barbaric,

because we hear about countries like Iran and Pakistan who still have blasphemy laws punishable by death!

Indeed, as we speak, author Salman Rushdie, is lying in a hospital bed from stab wounds

because a religious fanatic

was out to punish him for "blasphemy".

But the way fundamentalist countries and people deal with this bears almost no resemblance to how Jesus talked about "blasphemy".

The Greek word is “blasphemeo”
meaning “To speak mockingly of holy things.”
There are 2 reasons why Jesus calls it
“the unforgivable sin”.

1st, because he sees speech as the beginning of sin.

Either a tree makes good fruit or bad fruit...

You brood of vipers (Jesus said to the Pharisees).

How can you speak good things when your hearts are filled with evil.

For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks...

By your words you will be justified or condemned...”

Words are like seeds rooted in the heart.

And like trees growing from those seeds,
they grow, either good or bad.

And from those trees, from those seeds, fruit is ripened
that is either good or bad.

Let’s translate this metaphor into real world terms.

Consider how many crimes, how many murders,
start with words.

When a huge crime is committed,
the first place investigators search for clues,
is on personal computers and on the internet.

Almost always, there is some sort of word-trail,
some sort of public speech
before all-hell broke loose.

But nothing shows the entanglement of words and sin more than Silence.

How much sin is allowed to hatch and grow because no one spoke against it?

How many times in little conversations at seemingly trivial times was something wrong said & no one spoke against it.

“Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks...

By your words you will be justified or condemned...” Jesus said.

But he could also have said, *“By your silence.”*

The 2nd reason that blasphemy is the unforgivable sin is that an evil heart never wishes forgiveness; never asks for it.

An evil heart never admits it's wrong,

It never confesses it's sin,

It never shows it's remorse,

It never asks for restoration or reconciliation.

It just fights back, retaliates and never gives up.

So Iran, Pakistan notwithstanding, no laws will make any difference to a heart filled with blasphemy.

No death penalty will matter.

No dose of outer grace or love will affect any change.

In the world of psychology
there are a hand-full of mental illnesses
such as narcissism and anti-social disorder
that are deemed “incurable”.
Perhaps they are simply agreeing with Jesus
when he calls “blasphemy of the Holy Spirit”
unforgivable.

Certainly, no one would wish “blasphemy” on anyone.
But some hearts are that hard.
Some trees only give bad fruit.
But in this discussion, I do recommend this:
that we modern Christians find greater sympathy
to Jesus’ idea of blasphemy!
Especially when it comes to public speech.
We should all beware
of the sacred power of our words.
And, if we, ourselves, have the love of Christ
in our hearts,
none of us should mock other people’s holiness.

Think about blasphemy in an opposite way.
The opposite of blasphemy is “namaste”;
or - when we can say to another person,
“the god in me meets the god in you.”

In closing, I want to share a personal story about when I discovered the sacred power of words.

I was a senior at Proctor High School, in Proctor, VT. Each year the senior class had the privilege of choosing it's graduation speaker, and our class chose a 3rd party candidate for governor named - wait for it - Bernie Sanders!

So our school board offered a speaking contract to Mr. Bernie Sanders.

But soon afterward, our principal heard about Bernie's politics and rhetoric and demanded his speaking contract be revoked. "No one like him is going to speak at MY school." he said.

For awhile there was a lot of legal wrangling between the Sander's campaign, the school board and the senior class.

It became a cause-celeb that even The New York Times wrote an article about little Proctor High School.

But our principal remained entrenched and threatened to cancel graduation.

So slowly all parties withdrew their complaints.

But there was another tradition at graduation.
The speeches of two graduating seniors -
one of whom was I.

Now, our principal was no fool.
He thought we might try get revenge
so he demanded we show him our speeches
a week ahead of time - which he promptly censored.

Finally graduation night came.
Much of the town jammed into the gym.
My friend delivered the censored speech.
But I felt compelled to give my original speech -
which was on the theme of "Freedom of Speech".

Now, I'd done public speaking before,
but this was really the first speech I'd ever given
of my own creation.

As I stood at the podium I remember being terrified.
Not only because of the moment,
but also because, out of sight from the public,
standing behind the stage curtains, was our principal.
I knew that after I was finished,
I'd have to walk right by him in order to get my back
to my chair.

But I forged ahead.

I talked about how our country was founded on
freedom of speech.

And I remember using Voltaire's famous quote,

**"I may not agree with what you say,
but I'll defend to my death, your right to say it."**

It was not a vengeful speech.

It was not a tirade of anger and venom.

It was probably the beginnings of my creed,

"say strong things gently and gentle things strongly."

And when I was done, it seemed appreciated
by the public.

But I still had to get by the principal!

As I drew near to him in the shadows of the curtains,
to my amazement I could see tears in his eyes.

And as I got still closer, he stuck out his hand
and said, "You were right, I was wrong."

We shuck hands and I went back to me seat stunned!
What had just happened?

Now - looking back I know exactly what happened.

The sacred power of words happened.

The holy power of speech happened.

And it took a speech on The Freedom of Speech
to teach me that speech is never free.
It is one of the most valuable and sacred gifts we have.