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Acceptable Words

Psalm 19

Luke 4: 14-30

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There are some things you just don't do or say. I'm not thinking about yelling "Fire!" in a crowded theatre or doing something that's immoral or illegal. What I'm talking about are things like laughing out loud when someone you love is modeling for you a new outfit that may be the silliest looking thing you've ever seen but they are really excited about it. Or saying "yew!" when you're shown the picture of a newborn baby that isn't beautiful (You certainly would have been tempted to do that had you seen the first pictures of me – my grandmother once told me that I looked like I'd been a fight – and lost!). Or you certainly wouldn't say "Amen! Thank God!" when the preacher says, "One last point."

Too much candor is unacceptable, often for good reasons. But sometimes, the reason are not so good. Sometimes we don't speak our mind to the truth because to do so would make you an instant pariah or at least, quite unpopular.

Being accepted is important to most of us and most of the time, it is important to be accepted. We are communal creatures, as I talked about last Sunday. We are bound together by our common Creator and our biology in this one world that is one. So, to be accepted and acceptable is very important. But as essential as that may be, what we people of faith often forget, is that what we are ultimately called to do and say, is what is acceptable to God, as Psalm 19 proclaims:

"The heavens are telling the glory of God,"

the Psalm begins

"Day to day pours forth speech

and night to night declares knowledge.

There is no speech nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet, their voice goes out through all the earth,
their words to the end of the world.”

“Far from being a void,” writes Lawrence Wood, “the sky is the very word of God – a Torah of nature that can be read by anyone.” It’s as telling as what we call the law, described in the Psalm in verses 7-13, for this Torah tells of a Creator revealed in sun and rain, and all of what we call nature, and anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear, can read it – across the universe and in the world. It’s a law meant to be read out loud because God’s word is meant to be spoken. No wonder the psalm ends with words so familiar to preachers and regular sermon listeners

“Let the words of my mouth
and the meditations of my heart,
be acceptable to you,
O Lord,
my Rock and my Redeemer.”

(Psalm 19: 14)

I wonder if Jesus ever gave this a thought when he preached or taught or was engaged in some kind of work. In the Gospel reading, everything starts off pretty well. His hometown was buzzing with excitement and he read the scripture so well! “Isn’t he something! He’s one of us, all right; a chip off the old Nazareth block. Mary! Joseph! You must be so proud!” He read this fantastic passage from the scroll of Isaiah that puts into words the vision of what is to be someday, some time, for some people. Obviously, the people thought, it wouldn’t be for them – that’s too pie-in-the-sky, too idealistic in this realistic world. Some people, at some point would actually experience the truth of these words, but not right now – at least, not right here. Which is not so unlike many of us who live in this “real” world, one in which we take for granted that violence and injustice and inequities are the way it is and will always be. Peace on earth? Equality for all people? Right; someday, maybe in another life where utopias actually can be.

But then, Jesus startles them all – and if we take his words seriously, they should startle us, too: “Today,” he says, “this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

What does he mean, today? He’s not talking about us, is he? “The acceptable year of the Lord” – in Nazareth?

It’s fascinating to me that “Today” is the first public word of Jesus’ ministry outside of reading the scripture. “Today.” A simple word but a powerful word. For Jesus to declare that today the scripture is fulfilled is, according to Luke, the claim that the age of God’s reign is here. Now is the time, Jesus is declaring, that God’s promises come to be. Changes will occur for the poor and the oppressed; not in some future, but now. God’s way for human living is now, today. The great Jubilee, release for all who find themselves in chains, begins now.

Is it any wonder the buzz went through the crowd like a lightning bolt? The murmur was electric, passing from lips to ears and on down the line. It was, shall we say, acceptable speech to the people. Who wouldn’t want to hear such good news. But when someone stood up and asked him what he really meant by it, all the positive vibes get sucked out of the synagogue and the mood turns to anger, as he turns the words of scripture in upon his own people.

Most of the time, it’s hard to hear the truth when the truth isn’t very comforting, isn’t it? Especially when it comes right out of your deeply held values and your tradition. On the face of it, his listeners in Nazareth shouldn’t have become resentful or angry. All Jesus did was highlight two stories from his own and their own Jewish tradition, stories they taught him in Sunday school. So, why the anger that led to a lynch mob? Because Jesus was claiming that he had taken God’s favor to those beyond Nazareth, to Capernaum, which had a heavy non-Jewish population. And when he tells the stories of God’s mercy on the Gentiles through the prophets Elijah and Elisha, the people realize that this good news from Isaiah promising deliverance and salvation, news taught by this young buck of theirs, was not limited to them, but offered for all. And they didn’t want to hear of it; the words were unacceptable, so they stopped up their ears, refused to listen to this young, naïve upstart, and took it upon themselves to get rid of him.

Anger and violence, of course, is the last defense of those who are forced to face the truth of their own tradition which they have long embraced and defended. Hearing what we already know, but don’t want to deal with, is often painful and difficult. It’s much easier to listen to words that are acceptable to you rather than the truth that is acceptable to God, when they make you nervous, uncomfortable or angry.

“Let the words of my mouth
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be acceptable to you,

O Lord,
my Rock and my Redeemer.”

(Psalm 19: 14)

That’s what I prayed before I started to preach, but as I considered this sermon this week, I reflected back on the last few years and wondered how often I’ve been more concerned with preaching what is acceptable to me – and perhaps to you – than to God. Here we are at war, the thing that breaks the heart of God like nothing else, and I’ve spoken few words about it. Sure, before we invaded Iraq, I spoke about the alternative ways of our faith, of real peace-making and was against the invasion from the start. But to be honest, I’ve done a lousy job talking about the war because, since then, unlike Jesus, I worry about unacceptable words that might get me thrown off a cliff. And so, I have not flat out stated that my Christian conviction is that almost every single war, and in particular, this war, is diametrically opposed to the call of the One who loved his enemies so fully that he died for them. I have not said, very clearly, that the ways of peace-making are at the heart of the Gospel, the radical alternative to what our nation is engaged in right now, solving conflicts through violence. I have not said, flat out, that all people are children of the One, living God of many names, who live and share this one planet as our home and beyond our calling of loyalty to our nation or particular creed, is the call to be one, as God has made us one because God’s love and concern is no less for Iraqis, Afghans, Syrians or Iranians, than it is for Americans. I haven’t used acceptable words to God and said it is the church’s call – today – no less than it was Jesus’, to challenge the status quo that claims that the most important interests are our narrow national or personal interests, rather than the all-embracing love and concern for all people, especially “the poor, the captive, the blind and the oppressed,” as Jesus proclaimed.

If we are to survive as a people and a planet, and if the church is to truly be the church, the Body of Christ in the world, then we must reclaim the Force of Love which, is not sloppy sentimentalism but the unifying principle of life. Recall what the author of First John wrote:

“Let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. . . . God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them.”

(I John 4: 7-8, 16b)

We can no longer afford to worship the god of violence and revenge or bow before the altar of hatred, convinced there is no other way because this enemy is different and just doesn’t play by the same rules as we do. History has told us that

there has never been one war waged – by the U.S. or any other nation – that hasn't been justified in some fashion as necessary, a last resort or deemed moral by consenting clergy and most of the faithful. And history is littered with nations and individuals that pursued this path of violence and we live in an age when the oceans are rising and going crazy not only because of ever-rising global temperatures, but by the ever-rising heat of hatred. "Love," wrote Arnold Toynbee, "is the ultimate force that makes for the saving choice of life and good against the damning choice of death and evil. Therefore, the first hope in our inventory must be the hope that love is going to have the last word."

Love is the last word and the first word, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. "God is love," said John, said Jesus. "Today," Jesus says - now. Now is the time for good news, true liberation, recovery of our sight, the acceptable year of the Lord.

Let us begin now. Today, may we rededicate our lives to Christ who calls us to the tough and sometimes messy, often difficult and always risky ways of love as we struggle to fulfill the prayer we pray every Sunday in worship, that "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

Does the task look daunting – to love as Christ loved in a world of hatred, division and violence? Sure it does, and it is. But we have been called to speak and do what is acceptable to God and because we have, may our words and deeds be those of hope and longing, compassion, justice and peace.

Now is the time. Today is the day.

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O Lord,
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(Psalm 19: 14)