

# Images Matter

February 4, 2024

## Language

Language matters. How we speak to and about things matters.

Last week, I reflected here about tone and the truth that how we say things matters – that truly, genuinely asking one another “What hurt you?” and “Why are you here?” are ways we show up for one another. I’ll never forget the day a few years back that I was driving a young stranger somewhere. My husband, Scott, and I have an understanding that when I allow a stranger to get in the car with me, the first thing I do is call him to let him know where I’m going with them and when I intend to finish. The rationale is straightforward – not only am I giving him safety information, the stranger is hearing that someone else is concerned about my whereabouts.

I did this with an 18-year-old who was down on her luck who I was driving to a shelter, and when Scott and I got off the phone she asked, “Was that for real?” At first I thought she was asking whether the phone call was some sort of recording, but it turns out, she was asking whether Scott and my interaction was genuine. I’d simply told him what I was doing and that I expected to be home in about an hour and that if I weren’t, I would let him know. We then said, “Love you,” and hung up.

What she was wondering whether it was real was how kind and civil he and I were to each other. She told me that she had never heard people actually talk like that to one another. While that’s an extreme example, it’s all too common that we aren’t nearly as kind and gracious to the ones we’re closest with as we are to the wider public.

If tone matters, so does content. As Haley and I were planning for Lent earlier this week, I lifted up the possibility of singing a hymn that includes the phrase, “heal your children’s warring madness,” which reminded Haley of a book she’s reading, “Liturgy for All Bodies: New Words for a New World.” The book encourages us to be sensitive to the lived experiences of those around us,

“When we use words like ‘blind’ or ‘deaf’ or ‘lame’ as stand ins for a lack of understanding, we miss the amazing insights of people who learn different lessons from their senses.”

(Kimmothy Cole)

This came on the heels of a colleague, who happens to be a disability rights activist, pointing out his frustration with the new Billy Joel song. My colleague, a Billy Joel fan, writes:

“Several times in this song lyric, Billy talks about being ‘blind,’ but now he sees how good he has it in a relationship. Too often, in our music, in our worship, and in our lives, we use blindness and deafness as metaphors for some kind of ignorance, something that we couldn’t perceive until it was pointed out to us... There are so many better phrases we can be using.

‘I was confused.’

‘I was ignorant.’

‘I was reminded that I wasn’t appreciating what was in front of me.’

When we use physical disabilities as metaphors, we are appropriating the experiences of actual disabled people onto ourselves and dismissing their experiences.”

(Jacob Nault)

I know it feels like the word police, like those people who lament being politically correct and how “We can’t say anything anymore.” But think about it. If you were having a conversation with someone who was blind, would you hesitate to use “blind” as a metaphor? When visiting someone who is in an inpatient psychiatric program, would using the words “crazy” or “insane” to describe your boss’ expectations get stuck in your throat? Would you coach your kids not to say something is “lame” when one of their friends uses a wheelchair?

I encountered this dynamic this summer when I was emailing with Nicole Polarek about the Adult Education session she did today about her family’s experience of a mass shooting. I caught myself as I wrote the sentence, “Just shoot me an email with a few bullet points.”

Shoot. Bullet.

I couldn’t send that to her. Not after what they experienced. Since then, I’ve been working to cleanse gun-related imagery from my vocabulary. It’s not easy, but I do believe it is meaningful.

### **The Scriptures**

All of this is a long intro into our Gospel lesson for today. First, it is important to note that this passage comes on the heels of the passage we read last week. We’re still in chapter one. That also means that in our passage it is still the sabbath.

Last week, we read that Jesus was teaching and healing in the synagogue, and now he and his newly gathered disciples have moved to Simon’s home. Don’t forget that Simon is the disciple who later on will be renamed Peter. They move from the synagogue to Simon’s home, and there Jesus heals Simon’s mother-in-law, who had been sick with a fever.

A few things to note here: Jesus continues to heal on the sabbath, continues to discern a hierarchy of priorities and values. Healing someone is more important than keeping the sabbath. As we’re looking for real life applications of the scriptures, one question this text invites us to ponder and pray about is what some established rules or norms are that we’ve received that really should take a back seat to other values and priorities? Also of note is that Jesus heals Simon’s mother-in-law by taking her by the hand and lifting her up.

There’s a compassion and a tenderness and an intimacy in this healing story. It invites us to think about and pray about who in our lives could use a gentle hand up? Who might we reach out to with gentleness and compassion and grace? Then, we’re told that as soon as the fever left her, Simon’s mother-in-law began to serve.

In seminary, folks joked about the misogyny in this. She didn’t even get a chance to recuperate before immediately stepping back into her role. But those jokes largely stopped after my classmates took their first Biblical Greek course and realized that the word here is “diakonos,” which elsewhere in the Bible is translated “minister.” She immediately got up and started ministering to them, rather than being about gender roles, invites us to remember that as we are

healed, the only fitting response is to then put ourselves into service of healing. Once we've been blessed, the only fitting response is to be blessing.

I'd also point out that the fact that Jesus healed in both the public sphere in the synagogue and then in the private sphere at Simon Peter's home can serve as a reminder to us that our faith is relevant in both our public and private lives. To quote Cornell West once again: "Justice is what love looks like in public." Jesus healing people in a variety of settings reminds us that we need him across the settings of our lives.

Now, we finally get to the portion of the text which inspired my musings on language today. We're told that at sundown, that is, once the sabbath was over, the disciples brought to Jesus all who were sick or possessed by demons.

Demons. As a preacher in the 21st Century, it was easier to work with last week's passage that told us of a man with an unclean spirit. "An unclean spirit" is language that I suspect can resonate with us in our modern lives, even if it isn't part of our everyday speech. My guess is that many of us can think of people we've encountered over the years whose spirits were unclean, and I'm quite confident that we can all name a few people with unclean spirits from the news.

But a demon. A demon is different. Oftentimes in churches like ours today, the term demon is explained away as a pre-scientific term for schizophrenia, that when the Bible tells us of Jesus interacting with people with demons, it's really talking about people with mental illnesses that weren't named or understood in Biblical times. And, in many instances, that is the case.

However, for our purposes today, I invite you to use a less clinical lens. Now, you know that I'm not into magical thinking, unless it's about the Brewers, who I do believe will win a World Series in my lifetime. But, given this scripture passage and the state of the world, I wonder if there is some value in naming that there are demonic forces at work in the world. That those who are fomenting fascism across the world are possessed. That corporate greed that destroys the planet while subjugating the poor all to line the pockets of the uber-elite is demonic. That the individualism that we so prize has become a cancer, a hyper extreme self centeredness, which is evil, and which, in turn, has resulted in such truly demonic behaviors as the epidemic of gun violence in this country. And, that the antidote to all of this can be found in the ways and teachings of Jesus.

Note: I said "can be found." Jews and Muslims and Hindus and Humanists can also find ways genuine to their traditions to carve out a new and better way, but exploring that isn't my project today. Today, I'm here to encourage you to steep yourself in the ways and teachings of Jesus as an inoculation against, and indeed a cure for, the evil that feels like it is encroaching. Jesus taught us to take care of each other, and that whatever we do to the poor, the hungry, and the hurting, we are doing to him. Jesus taught us that our priorities need to be on the healing and wellbeing of those around us, rather than on loyalty to institutions and traditions. Jesus taught us that each person, indeed all of creation, is wholly and completely beloved by God, and in that has intrinsic worth. Jesus taught us to rest, to step out of the arena regularly, to pray, to engage with nature, to recharge and reconnect with the divine, our source.

## **Conclusion**

Friends, our religious images are rife with imagery. The blind see. The lame walk. Demons are called out. At times, it may be hard to know when these images are insensitive and when they are warranted. Today, the ruler that I used was whether, when engaging with someone, would my imagery and language be insensitive? I would be heartbroken if someone who was deaf or blind felt their lived experience was diminished because of my metaphor. I would be devastated if someone's healing from trauma was set back even 10 minutes because of my insensitive use of the phrase "bullet point" or "Powwow." And, at least for today, I'm okay with calling that which is demonic, demonic. Some may point out that images of blindness and paralysis are Biblical, but I remind you that Jesus engaged both the physical and the spiritual, often addressing one to get at the other.

What I know is that language matters. I have no doubt that this sensitivity will be a journey for me and for us. I suspect that we're not going to be able to be universal in eradicating this imagery from our worship. (Y'all would run me out of town if we never sang Amazing Grace again.) But I do intend to be more intentional. And in that, I hope you will join me.

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