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The Language of the Gospel

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As children we used to sing at those who mocked us, “Sticks ‘n stones may break my bones but words can never harm me.” Yet anyone who has been teased unmercifully or badgered verbally by the school bully, a critical parent, or a hostile spouse knows full well that words can reduce the strong to tears, induce non-stop stomach cramps, and even seriously damage one’s whole life. Conversely, anyone who has been praised knows words can generate more warmth than a fireplace, turn tears to laughter, open windows on wonderful new vistas and create exciting new futures.

Objectively, words may be innocent signs. But words are never truly objective—they are always used by subjects, persons, normally for the purpose of communicating with other persons. Words have power, power to share our understandings, power to shape our perceptions of reality, power to shape reality itself. How many men live cramped, damaged lives, how many suffer heart attack or stroke because they were all too often told “men aren’t supposed to cry” and so they stuff all their emotions inside until they can’t help but burst? How many South Africans have been shut out of universities, businesses, beaches, life, because generations of Christians stoutly asserted that black is the opposite of white, light, right, good, God? How many women and children suffer physical and psychological abuse because they heard all too often that the man is the head of the household?¹ Words have power to shape lives. As Walter Burghardt writes:

Words, I learned from experience, can be weapons, and words can be healing. Words can unite in friendship or sever in enmity. Words can unlock who I am or mask me from others. Two words, “Sieg

Heil," bloodied the face of Europe... Words sentence to death ("You shall be hanged by the neck") and words restore to life ("Your sins are forgiven you"). Words declare a marriage dead, and words covenant a life together in love. Words charm and repel, amuse and anger, reveal and conceal, chill and warm...²

Words name our world, words define our relationships to things and to persons. "Ah, what an exquisite yellow rose—but don't touch it, its thorns are sharper than needles!" "That is our Seminary president—but he is very down to earth, quite approachable, and generous, too. You needn't feel intimidated by him!"

Words do not only name our world. Because they name who we are in relationship they name us and make us who we are. Fred Craddock, reflecting on Heidegger's concept of language, suggests that when we are speaking of language, being itself is at stake.³ Quite so. I am who I am perhaps not totally but certainly because my parents said yes to each other, because they named me Pamela, because of words said about me, words said to me. "Have you ever thought about going to seminary?" asked a college professor. "Certainly not," I replied. But the next thing I knew, I was in the M.Div. program at Union Seminary in New York. "You belong in Ph.D. studies," said the director of my D.Min. program. "Oh? You think so?" I answered. As a result of words my life changed dramatically, interests and goals were reconfigured, old relationships dissolved and new ones came into being. I no longer am exactly or perhaps even very much who I was before these words were spoken. Similarly, you are who you are, perhaps not totally but certainly because of words said to you, words said about you. Letters and words of recommendation help get us into schools, into jobs, into administrative positions, into personal relationships, into life-changing and personality-transforming experiences. Letters and words release us: "This institution is no longer viable and will be closed at the end of the year." "Congratulations on your 65th birthday! Enjoy your retirement." "This relationship is over." We will never be the same because of the words said and written about us. Never.

Words are potent, but they are not always true. Words can fail to name, David Buttrick says.⁴ Television commercials and car dealerships have mastered this trick—0% financing or no

payment until this time next year! Of course what they fail to say is that we have to buy two cars at once or surrender our mothers as collateral. Words can also mis-name—"words lie" adds Buttrick bluntly.⁵ Sex is dirty, the only good Russian is a dead one, a little sniff won't hurt you. So thousands of couples need therapists to help them do what should happen joyfully and freely; the world is racked with poverty because for over 40 years we have thrown billions of dollars into the insatiable maw of the "cold war"; untold thousands of lives are lost or brains fried by just a little sniff of cocaine. Worse, words can un-name, and therefore obliterate. "Children should be seen and not heard" really means children have nothing to contribute to human discourse, which really means they are not human and should be invisible as well as unheard and thus non-existent—at least until they've grown up. If your bishop consistently forgets to put your name on a call list, it won't matter what kind of grades you got in seminary—as far as the ministry goes, you don't exist. Pass over me when you issue dinner invitations to the rest of the community and I may well cease to exist for you—out of sight, out of mind. But name me as a dinner guest and even if you really don't know me we become accountable to each other—you for seeing I get plenty to eat, I for not starting food fights or kicking other guests under the table.

Words have enormous power, power over us, under us, making or breaking us, supporting and affirming us, or denying and negating us—perhaps not alone, but certainly. It is all the more so for Christians. Baptized into Christ, we are called to proclaim in all times and places the good news of God's love for all—to name God's love, to name every person in our global village as God's, for the life of the world and to the glory of God, whatever others may say. Thus the language we use in preaching and liturgy, in the classroom and at the dinner table, is not ever, ever small talk; it is not ever a minor concern, because we are dealing with Gospel which, as we know, is a matter of life or death. What language then, shall we use? What words?

We have a whole book of words—the Bible. Surely its words are equal to the task! After all, we call scripture God's word, because in it God reveals Godself to us, because in it we see Christ Jesus the Word of God enfleshed, walking around

the roads of Palestine changing people's lives with words (and deeds). Yet the words of scripture are *human* words, inspired by God, yes, absolutely, but they are nonetheless human words, phrases, grammar. Witness, for example, Paul's letters, filled with language cast out of his experience as a one-time Jewish persecutor of Christians. His words reflect his knowledge of the law and the pattern of thinking ingrained in him in the pharisaic schools, they reveal what he knows of those to whom he writes, and he uses his audience's language to mediate God's word.⁶ So also the Chronicler, Jeremiah, the Psalmists, the Gospels, the Apocalypticist. All use languages particular to their unique times and places; all present their claims about God in idioms as different from one another as British English is from Hutterite English or Texan English, let alone Inuit or Thai. Not only are the tongues of scripture diverse, their words are thousands of years old—written in languages we no longer speak, out of mind-sets and world views we no longer share. Even reading them right off the page attests to multiple hermeneutical tasks—translating from Hebrew or Greek or Aramaic into English, translating from eighth century BC or first century AD to the 1990s, from Palestine or Babylon to Hawaii, Pittsburgh, or the prairie provinces. And that is to say nothing of the interpretive process of choosing which text, or the interpretive nature of tone of voice, inflection, posture.... Moreover, as Craddock notes, "some words simply wear out, some change their meanings, others become obsolete, while many fall victim to vulgarization."⁷ Who talks about candlepower in a world of kilowatts, lumens and lasers? What meaning does firmament have in a universe that knows spaceflight beyond our galaxy and into infinity? How about "gird up your loins"? What do we know about sackcloth and ashes, wineskins old or new? Thee, thou and thy once were the familiar form, used to speak to one's beloved or to one's child. But lo, these are now pronouns of reverence, distance, respect and awe, used for God alone. The ordinary and intimate became sacred and distant by virtue of words which got separated from their original intent and meaning.

We cannot just use old words, not even sacred old words. We cannot rely on them to convey their original meaning, we cannot assume that words as linguistic constructs hold truth objectively within themselves. Yes, it is God who is revealed

in these words, but it is not, in the end, the words themselves that matter, it is the Word in the words, it is Godself.

How wonderful that when Moses asks God for God's name what Moses gets is a verb. We know the tetragrammaton is *not* a noun. It is not a *name* for God; it is *not* a word of thing-ness, it is an act of God's be-ing. God says, "I am who I am—I will be who I will be, and no images, thanks, folks, because I know you, you'll confuse me with the image, you'll make a thing of me, you'll focus on the image, on the thing, and forget I am—I will be." So what did we do? Why, the tetragrammaton became for us too holy to speak, at best, or more likely, we just couldn't tolerate the fluidity of a verb as the means of identifying God. So obviously we had to come up with something else, something more tangible. We came up with "Lord", which, ironically, as the Elijah story in 1 Kings 18 suggests, is what one calls false gods, those who usurp authority and presume to rule over us.⁸ Worse, "I am—I will be" became "Lord", which is to say that we reduced "I am—I will be" to one dimension, lordship, leaving room for no other relationship between us and God except that of hierarchical dominance/subservience. As if that were not enough, "Lordship" became identified with divinity, and we perversely presumed that anyone who could be identified as Lord is thus imbued with divinity and so has a right to rule over us. History itself reveals the resulting travesty of serfdom and slavery and wife and child abuse.

We did the same thing with abba, Jesus' word of address to God. Abba, as we know, means "daddy". But abba is *not* a word of thing-ness, abba is *not* a description of the dominance/subjection typical of notions of Fatherhood in Jewish tradition, and abba certainly is *not* a matter of gender. Abba is an invitation to intimate relationship,⁹ "I am—I will be" being-for-us-and- with-us. But such intimacy apparently made the powerful righteous squirm, and abba became by sleight of hand, Father, with a capital F. Of course, we know a lot more about fathers than about "I am—I will be". Father, like Lord, is something we can get a handle on, something we can get control of by eliminating what is not father, something we can be comfortable with by keeping a certain safe distance from. So we made Father God's name. And by our almost exclusive use of that noun to identify God, we reduced "I am—I will

be" once more to one dimension, made of God a single thing, put God in a box, created of God an image (father-image), and whatever happened to the second commandment?¹⁰ Yet the tetragrammaton and all of scripture, and most especially Christ Jesus, tell us God is *be-ing*, not a thing to be grasped, but be-ing-in-relationship-with-us. All of us.

How wonderful the plurality and fullness of God's revelation to us in scripture about Godself! God enlivens the world,¹¹ God gives birth to us, names us, nurses us at the divine breast, bonds the divine self to us.¹² God covenants with us as colleagues, supports us like a rock, struggles with us against the world, God grieves and repents over us.¹³ God walks and talks arm in arm with us—a loving friend. God feeds, clothes, and shelters us,¹⁴ makes and fulfills promises, heals, comforts, and confronts us.¹⁵ In Christ Jesus we see that God weeps with us in our pain and sorrow; God does theology with us, breaks bread with us, forgives us our narrow-mindedness and our failure to love. God births us anew in the Spirit, loves us and lives in us and knits us together as one body. Here is God for all of us, for those who have cried out for mommy or daddy in the night, felt the earth shake under our feet, nearly drowned in anger or guilt, walked an empty beach with a lonely friend, hungered, fed, taught, sewed, promised, forgave, loved. Here is God for all of us, God-being-for-us as God will be—in a multitude of expressions of the divine self; expressions that claim God's equal intimacy with each of us no matter our differences and in spite of our sin. So Paul in the letter to the Galatians says that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. God lives intimately with all of us. As members of the body of Christ, God asks intimacy among all of us, not homogeneity but intimacy, living in one another's shoes, bearing each other's sorrow and joy, not just knowing about one another's reality, no matter how different from our own, but owning it, living it, no matter how painful it may be.

The thing is, when our language fails to name the full range of God's being- for-us insofar as we know it, when we focus on just one dimension, everything else begins to disappear. When we fail to identify God as God of the Hebrews, as God who embraces Jewishness, how easy it is for Christians to blame the Jews for Jesus' death, to persecute them with the inquisition, to ghetto-ize and dehumanize them until what we get is

the holocaust. When we fail to acknowledge God as being-of-all-colors, as being-who-embraces-all-skins, how easy it is for Christians to think that God is somehow not for black people, yellow people, red people, that those people are not very connected to divinity if at all; that they are ungodly, inhuman and so it is acceptable if we Christians enslave them, steal their land, refuse them freedom of movement, ignore them and their pleas for the means of survival. Because God is always called father but never mother, we get to thinking God is male, that femaleness and divinity have nothing to do with each other. And so women have been seen as “the Devil’s Gateway”,¹⁶ “not the image of God”,¹⁷—we have been bought and sold as property, we have been ignored in the church, denied our God-given places as full members of the body of Christ and the priesthood of all believers. To this day in our churches, despite much lip-service to the contrary, women still are trivialized and mocked because we are not, after all, male, because we are not so very close to God because God is Father, don’t you know, and what do Fathers know about/have to do with menstrual cramps and painfully swollen breasts, the tearing of flesh in the birthing process,¹⁸ and the terror of and horror of rape? Precisely so.

What we are talking about when we are dealing with language is being itself, God’s and our own. It is *not* our call to try to shape God’s being but only to affirm that God is being-for-us in multiple ways that transcend what any one word or type of metaphor can express. It *is* our call, on the other hand, to shape a new reality, a new *social* reality in our world. God *has* shown us what is good and what God requires of us: that we do justice, love kindness, love God and our neighbor as ourselves. So Jesus walked the land, human, Jew, young, male, yes, all those things, but most importantly God-for- and-with Samaritans, women, children, liars and thieves, rich folk and poor, pharisees, tax collectors, fisherfolk, sellers of purple goods, centurions, homemakers, lepers.... So Jesus walked the earth, living justice of a new kind, living the love of a God whose being surpasses every norm, living care and attention and affirmation and empowering of the least of these my sisters, brothers, nephews, grandmothers. So Jesus walked the earth, speaking a language that rearranged lives, speaking words that cracked social conventions and shattered religious traditions, speaking

phrases that dared the comfortable righteous to surrender all their laws which exclude for love which includes even the least of these my sisters, brothers.

Jesus' own ministry attests that we cannot unquestioningly use words, phrases, linguistic structures of the past, because we do not live with God in the past, but in the present; because we do not focus on what was but what will be. God has shown us what is good.

Language, you see, is a justice issue.¹⁹ It is the same issue that leads to the building of ramps for wheel chair travellers because they, too, are called to join the Christian community and to minister. It is the same issue that empowers protests against apartheid and cries out against Chinese tyrants who keep people from self-governance. It is the same issue that enables endurance of the wrath of the establishment in order to empower indigenous folk to regain their identity, their dignity, their land. It is the same issue that does battle against drugs that destroy endless lives, that fights against systems that keep one in five Regina citizens and the majority of the citizens of the "third world" in abject poverty, without food, shelter, clothing. It is the same issue that refutes the acceptability of "generic" language and claims women's right to recover her-story and to experience full equality in every venue. It is the same issue that makes it imperative that we reshape our liturgical and homiletical events so that in all their languages they faithfully treat women's realities and affirm the feminine face of God.²⁰ If we believe in justice, God's justice, then we believe in just language.

Gospel claims God comes in human form. Gospel claims we are all made members of Christ's body. Gospel calls us to love our neighbor as much as and in the same way *as we love our selves*, our neighbor who is the last creature on earth we would ever want to claim as our neighbor. Gospel sets us free of language which mis-names, un-names, dehumanizes any person or group, and so dehumanizes Christ. Gospel releases us from letters which kill.²¹ Thus we no longer will use words, phrases, linguistic structures of the past, which have too often been used and are still often used to burn, gas, rape, deny.

Gospel empowers us to do justice, but we will not get the justice right until we get the language right, until our words no longer ignore, impoverish, violate and murder by un-naming or

mis-naming, by belittling or ignoring, by confusing truth with a particular grammar, by limiting God to a single dimension. We can get the words right because God is bigger than we let ourselves think, because God speaks to us through the languages of the past in prophetic language—in the language of *our* time—language that challenges, confronts, names our idolatry, our injustice, our sin. We can get the words right and we can get the justice right because God is bigger than we can conceive or name, because God invites us to use many names for the divine self so that we know none is excluded from God and none from our relationships. We can get the language right and we can get the justice right because we all are made equal members of the same body, because we are given new identities in love, because we share the same anguish, hope for and call to help bring about peace on earth, freedom, love, real life for all God's family. We can get the language right, and we can get the justice right, because love conquers all, and because there is life after death.

But we cannot wait any longer. There is no time to waste, lives are at stake. Human lives, and God's life, because God is God-with-us. All of us. Immanuel is, after all, what Gospel is about. So the words we use in preaching and liturgy will never be small talk, never a minor matter. The language we use will be the language of Gospel, Gospel of God-being-for-us, all of us, language that expresses God's love for everyone alike, in the face of societal, historical, cultural, religious convention. The language we use will be language which like Gospel itself sets us free from bondage, oppression, trivialization, dehumanization, sin; language which gives life to all alike—young, old, male, female, Canadian, Nicaraguan, Russian, Vietnamese, differently-abled and differently hued, AIDS victims and Olympic athletes. The language we use will be the language that names each of us in our particularity as God's, enlivens us, empowers us to live as God's. This is the language of preaching, of proclamation, of worship, of Christian life—courageous language that shatters idols and lies; *not* language which causes death, but language that gives life.

Notes

- ¹ The reader will find a thorough discussion of this and related issues in *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse*, Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, eds. (NY: The Pilgrim Press, 1989).

- 2 Walter J. Burghardt, S.J., *Preaching, The Art & The Craft* (NY: Paulist Press, 1987) 6.
- 3 Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (Enid: Phillips University Press, 1974) 36-37.
- 4 David Buttrick, *Homiletic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) 8.
- 5 Ibid. 9.
- 6 E.g., Acts 17:22.
- 7 Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985) 198.
- 8 I am indebted to my student, Michael Rodgers, for this insight.
- 9 Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982) 151, 166-167, 170-171.
- 10 Ex. 20:4f; Deut. 5:8f.
- 11 Gen. 1.
- 12 Num. 11:12; Isa. 66:9, etc.
- 13 Hos.; Ex. 32:14; Am. 7:3, etc.
- 14 Exodus tradition; Gen. 3:21; Neh. 9:21; Ps. 61:4, etc.
- 15 Isa. 66:13; miracles stories.
- 16 Tertullian, "On the Apparel of Women," 1,1, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965).
- 17 Augustine, "de Trinitate," 12, 7, 10; in *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956). Rosemary Radford Ruether conveniently cites the misogynist opinions of other theologians in *Women-Church* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986) 138-139.
- 18 Isa. 42:14b; 49:15; 66:9, for example, however, all make quite clear the Motherhood of God.
- 19 James F. White, "The Words of Worship," *Christian Century*, December 13, 1978, p. 1202f.
- 20 We use the plural word "languages" here to address the fact that language is not merely verbal. Gestures, use of space, liturgical structures all communicate something about the nature of our relationship(s) with God, and all need to be examined and redesigned with regard to the concerns raised in this paper.
- 21 Rom. 7:6; 2 Cor. 3:6.