

A Right Hook From Metaphors

Texts: James 3: 1-12; The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language (Janet Martin Soskice); Wearing God: Clothing, Laughter, Fire, and Other Overlooked Ways of Meeting God (Lauren Winner)

June 28, 2020

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”

This is an obvious lie.

How do I know that? Because the only time we say these words is right after someone has said something incredibly hurtful. It is a way of comforting ourselves or our children by pretending that words don't matter, and words *do* matter! There wouldn't be tears about them if they didn't.

Mike Yaconelli tells the story of Margaret in his book, *Messy Spirituality: God's Annoying Love For Imperfect People*. Margaret had a fateful encounter with her teacher, Mrs. Garner, when she was nine years old. Margaret was a little girl who was often distracted by things, and she ended up coming to class late quite often.

One day, as she ran in late again to class, Mrs. Garner made Margaret come and stand at the teacher's desk. And then she said,

“Margaret has been a bad girl. I've tried to help her be responsible. But apparently she doesn't want to learn. So we must teach her a lesson. We must force her to face what a selfish person she has become. I want each of you to come to the front of the room, take a piece of chalk, and write something bad about Margaret on the blackboard. Maybe this experience will motivate her to become a better person!” ...

One by one the students wrote their life-smothering words. ... ‘Margaret is stupid. Margaret is selfish. Margaret is a dummy. Margaret is ugly. No one likes Margaret.’ One by one, twenty five sentences criticizing Margaret went up on the board.”

Today, such a thoughtless and cruel act would be a firing offense, but apparently nothing happened to that teacher. However, something happened to Margaret. The words hurt her, burrowed into her, and the pain ate away at her soul, until she truly believed what the other children had written.”

Words do have power, and can make a difference, a profound difference, in the way people see the world and see themselves.

That's why James is so insistent that we must become masters of the tongue, because words have such power to shape reality, to shape who we ourselves are, and how we think about who God and who other people are.

I was thinking about all of this a couple of weeks ago after service when I was speaking with Kate Klonowski. In the middle of the service, I had been talking about God, and I

just naturally said 'he'. I was telling Kate how upset I was with myself for letting that pronoun slip in without thinking.

Now, I grew up with God as 'he', but it's been a long time since I have learned that God is a person, but not a gendered person. That is, God is neither male nor female. God is Spirit, but still personal—that is, not impersonal, like the wind, or a storm, or something like that. But God doesn't have a gender.

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg likes to say that the proper pronoun for God is ... God!

For many of us our comfort with the male pronoun for God represents a hierarchy of values that sets male above female. We may not even realize it until we are confronted with the feminine pronoun for God, as we were in the first part of our liturgy today.

We may happily say that we don't believe God is male or female, but we make no objection when the male pronoun for God slips in. However, I'm wondering how many of us felt uncomfortable saying or hearing God referred to as she and her, or referenced in feminine images in that opening liturgy.

I know I was uncomfortable writing it in a way that I probably wouldn't have been if I had been using male pronouns and images. Perhaps you had that experience too.

But my discomfort itself shows that I still have a long way to go in my views of gender equality. Looking closely at the language I use for God can help me to see what I don't want to see, and to grow as a person by recognizing biases and errors in my thinking.

Let me give you another example of the power of language to reveal our hidden secrets, as well as to get at the truth, from my friend, Bishop Talbert Swan.

Bishop Swan is a black bishop of the Church of God in Christ, and he likes to write on the social media platform Twitter that Jesus was black.

He just says it straight out: Friends, Jesus was black.

This always provokes a storm of replies from angry white people pointing out that Jesus was not black, that Jesus was probably an olive skinned Mediterranean person, more light brown if anything, but certainly not black. People are very insistent on the accuracy of Jesus' skin color, and that he was not black. It's very important to them to get this point right. They say they are not racist, but just object to this mistaken portrayal of Jesus.

But Bishop Swan likes to point out that Jesus has been portrayed as white for a thousand years, and most churches have a picture of a white Jesus in them somewhere, and these same people who are objecting to him saying that Jesus was black have never said a word about Jesus not really being white. They are not in their pastor's office insisting that the blond haired blue-eyed white Jesus pictures be taken down.

And you never hear anyone objecting to the idea that Jesus was white with anything like the anger that people object to Bishop Swan's statement that Jesus was black. That

tells us a lot about the hierarchy of color and race in our own hearts, and reveals the hidden places we'd rather not look. Our language about God and Christ, tells us something about ourselves.

When we choose, as Lauren Winner wrote in one of our contemporary readings, only three or four images of God, we lock God into those images in people's minds, and it's very hard to break out.

And if one of those images, say of God as a father, which is normally a good and strong image of a person looking out for you, taking care of you, supporting you and strengthening you, if one of those images happens to have a terrible meaning in someone's life because their own father was a mean, and abusive, and uncaring, or absent person, then that becomes God for them, because we aren't supplying people with any other images that they could use instead.

And Winner points out that we don't need to do that, that there are plenty of other images in Scripture for God that we could use alongside the image of God as Father, or Mother, or Ruler, or Lord, or Shepherd, or Love, or Light, or Storm rider, or ...well, you get the picture, or should I say pictures!

It's important to use alternative metaphors and images for God, and even for Christ, because they make Christ available to everyone. In my student days at the University of Toronto, the seminary there put up a statue called 'The Crucified Woman' in its courtyard. It was Christ as a woman.

Some people objected angrily to this statue. I was one of them. Christ was not a woman, we said. That's just wrong. I was kind of a literalist in my thinking back then.

Now I realize what a fool I was. The point of the statue wasn't to say that Christ was a woman. The point of the statue was to help us realize that the fact that Christ was a man was an incidental, irrelevant fact.

Christ's gender had nothing to do with Christ's saving power. Christ's maleness didn't make him somehow more like God, or somehow more human, than if Christ had been a woman.

I'm sure that that statue helped many women to see their own full humanity in Christ, to realize that they were not second class citizens in God's eyes. It helped them to feel in their flesh that Christ had come for them in a way that a statue of a male Jesus never could have. It certainly helped me, eventually, to see what was really important about Jesus, and that it wasn't his maleness!

Language, metaphor, image: they all have power. Power to hurt, and power to heal. Going forward, I'm going to try to be even more conscious of the images and metaphors that I use for God, to offer alternatives that can be powerful ways of connecting us with God that lie outside our normal set of three or four images.

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me. We've seen that that's certainly not true. Words and images can hurt. But they can also reveal, and they

can connect people to God and to each other, and they can give insight, and they can heal:

Remember Margaret? Well, years after her classmates had all written those terrible sentences on the board, Margaret was talking with a Christian counselor.

The counselor took Margaret in her memory back to the schoolroom from years ago, and asked her to remember what each of the 25 students had written and how she had felt about each sentence.

This was easy for Margaret, as she could remember every detail after forty years. When she was finished, with tears in her eyes, she heard her counselor whispering her name: Margaret. Margaret. Her counselor told her, "Margaret, you left out one person who was there."

And Margaret said indignantly, "I most certainly did not!" But the counselor insisted, saying, "No, Margaret, you did forget someone. See, he's sitting at the back of the classroom. He's the last one to go to the board. He's standing up, and walking towards Mrs. Garner. She's handing him a piece of chalk. He's walking to the board, and you recognize that it's Jesus, Margaret, it's Jesus. He was there, just as he promised.

And Jesus is at the board, and now he's picking up an eraser, and he's erasing every one of the sentences that the other students wrote. They're gone now. Gone, every one of them.

And now he's writing his own sentences on the board, writing new sentences. He's writing how he sees you: Margaret is kind. Margaret is gentle. Margaret is strong. Margaret is beautiful. Margaret has great courage. Margaret belongs. Margaret is loved.

Margaret began to weep in her counselor's office, but then began to smile, and finally to laugh. For the first time in forty years, she felt free of the words the other children had written. She was no longer condemned, no longer rejected, no longer alone. Jesus was there. His words replaced the words of the children. His words had started to heal her. Jesus' words were powerful words, and his words were God's words, to surround Margaret with God's love. Words can hurt, but in God's love, words can heal too. May our words in this church always be healing words, filled with the love and acceptance of Christ. Amen