

## **Sticks and stones**

Matthew 5:21-24

February 16, 2014

ῥακά ...

You good-for-nothing, empty-headed, piece of ...

μωρέ ...

You worthless fool. You stupid idiot.

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words ...” Words may cause an injury that no orthopedist or surgeon can mend. Words may leave a festering wound that never heals, deep scars that persist for a lifetime. Words may cause mortal harm to an individual man or woman or child, or even to entire classes of people.

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never harm me.” It’s a lie.

ῥακά. μωρέ. Jesus used these words.

*You know the rules, he said. Whoever commits murder will be brought to justice. But I am telling you now, whoever calls his brother ῥακά will be brought to justice, too, and whoever calls her sister μωρέ will be in danger of going to hell!*

Jesus equates name-calling with murder. So, are you a murderer? Or is Jesus exaggerating? Is he engaging in hyperbole to make a point? Or does he really mean it? Are words, is language, are the ways we speak to and about each other, potentially lethal weapons?

Yes, they are. Words are powerful. We use words, but words are not merely our servants. Words are our masters, the sole lens through which the world around us becomes meaningful. Words do not merely attach a name or assign meaning to what we perceive. Words shape the ways we perceive and words create meaning.

Let me give you an example. A toddler scrunches her face and sticks out her tongue and you exclaim, “How cute!” And what was to her an incidental or even accidental movement of muscles of face and tongue now has meaning -- “cute,” and when she does it again (and again and again), she will do it, not

just to amuse herself, but because it is “cute,” because she is trying to be “cute,” because being “cute” gets her attention and wins her praise.

Another example, suggested to me by Steve Prust. Two students score 90% on an exam. The same, right?

But the parents of one student tell her, “This is entirely unacceptable. You should have scored at least 98%. Why didn’t you study harder? Why are you always disappointing us?”

‘The parents of the other student can hardly contain themselves: “90%? Wow! Great job! We are so proud of you!”

The same, right? Now I am not concerned here with motivation or performance vs. potential or longterm results. I am only concerned with meaning and the power of words to create meaning. The meaning of 90% for the first student is “bad,” but it is more than that. She is “bad.” She is a failure. She is a disappointment. This is how she perceives herself. This is her reality.

And the second student? Her reality? She knows she is smart, capable, good, valued.

I heard an NPR report this week, an analysis of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, a study conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics to track life changes among young men and young women. One sociologist who studied the data surprisingly discovered that “racial classifications of people in the survey seemed to change over time.” In other words, a person once identified as belonging to a particular race, may, at a later date, be identified as belonging to a different race.

She found that the changes were not random, but “driven by changes in the people’s life circumstances and common racial stereotypes.” She explained: “If someone went from being employed to being unemployed, or being out of prison to being in prison, or being off welfare to being on welfare, the interviewer was more likely to see the person as black -- after they experienced that sort of downward mobility -- than before.”

She found too that “when people had died as a result of homicide, funeral directors were more likely to list the person as being black, even when family members listed the person as belonging to another race,” and “if the dead person died of cirrhosis ... the funeral director was more likely to list the person as being Native American, even when family member listed the person as belonging to another race.”

Even more tellingly, people's own self-identification changed in similar fashion: "When people went to prison, they became more likely to think of themselves as black." As the NPR reporter put it: "It's not just our perceptions of race that drive our stereotypes, but our stereotypes that drive our perceptions of race."

Words, stereotypes, create meaning. They are the powerful filter through which we see everything, even ourselves. Words, stereotypes, the ways we speak to and about each other, can add dignity, or take it away.

What is dignity? Dignity is respect, self-respect, gravitas, importance, esteem, value. Is dignity earned or innate? Is it something we have from birth or something we must prove or win? Is dignity something we give ourselves? Or is dignity given to us by someone else?

Michael J. Fox thinks it's the former. He says: "One's dignity may be assaulted, vandalized and cruelly mocked, but it can never be taken away unless it is surrendered."

But Pope Francis has a different take. Writing in the fourth chapter of his *Evangelii Gaudium*, the "Gospel of Joy," he answers both questions with this one statement:

*To believe in a Father who loves all men and women with an infinite love means realizing that "he thereby confers upon them an infinite dignity."*

Dignity is not won or earned or self-created. It is conferred, by God. And dignity is not relative or measured. Dignity is absolute and inherent, but not by birthright. Dignity is God's gift.

Given to whom? To all men and women. Accordingly, Francis insists, we who are God's people must acknowledge the dignity of each and every human being and care for them, especially those who are otherwise overlooked and underappreciated, especially those who are vulnerable. He enumerates: the homeless, the addicted, refugees, indigenous peoples, the elderly, children who are targets for human trafficking, women who "endure situations of exclusion, mistreatment, and violence," the unborn, and even the earth itself which is all too easily exploited instead of loved.

And especially the poor. Francis reminds us that

*God's heart has a special place for the poor, so much that he himself "became poor."*

He reminds us, too, that

*our brothers and sisters are the prolongation of the incarnation for each of us: "As you did it to one of these, the least of my brethren, you did it to me."*

The least among us are Christ among us, and just as we have so much to learn from Christ, we have so much to learn from them. Francis writes:

*... in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them ... We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them.*

In other words, we are called to grant them dignity.

We have already heard Francis say: "Inequality is the root of social ills," referring especially to economic inequality. But just as wide and just as deadly as any disparity of wealth among us is a disparity of dignity.

And the two are related. We stereotype the poor, all too readily classifying them willy-nilly as lazy or unmotivated or spoiled by handouts, while the facts are these:

*Two-thirds of people living in poverty [in the US] work an average of 1.7 jobs.*

*83% of children from low-income families have at least one employed parent.*

*Poor working adults spend more hours working each week than their wealthier counterparts.*

*The majority of those living in poverty do not receive government welfare assistance.*

*[And] of those that [do] ... more than half stop receiving benefits after a year, 70% within two years, and 85% within four years.*

(Statistics taken from article on WISCAP -- Wisconsin Community Action Program Association -- website.)

Sure, there are lazy people, unmotivated people, spoiled people among the poor, but there are equally as many lazy and unmotivated and spoiled people among the rich! Yes? Stereotypes create meaning. Words, stereotypes, the ways we speak to and about each other, add dignity or take it away.

*To believe in a Father who loves all men and women with an infinite love means realizing that "he thereby confers upon them an infinite dignity."*

God confers dignity, through love. And we too may confer dignity, through love.

Do you know someone living with little dignity? What words might you speak, in love, to heal their spirits, and to acknowledge in them the fullness of dignity God has already granted them?