
What I Want My Words To Do To You

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Proper 19 – Year B

“*What I want my words to do to you.*”^[1] That’s the title of a documentary that has been on my mind this week, as I’ve been thinking about this reading from James. It’s about a writing workshop in Bedford Hills prison for women, facilitated by playwright Eve Ensler, and culminating in a performance at the prison, with professional actresses (like Glenn Close and Mary Alice!) giving voice to the inmates’ work.

Over the course of the seminar, fifteen participants were challenged to reflect back on their past, through writing prompts like “how I got my scar,” or “why I’m in prison,” or “a question I wish people would ask.” Almost all of them recalled ways that they had been wounded by words—by disparaging words spoken or caring words withheld when they were younger; by the one-dimensional stories told about them in court and the media; and by the one-dimensional labels that they bore now: criminal, prisoner, monster, mistake.

They reckoned also with the harm *they* had done, through their own actions and words—through what they had said or not said or not been honest about; and how, in many cases, that had opened the way to greater evil and tragic violence.

But that’s not all. Through writing and sharing with the group, they were discovering new ways to use words, too: to heal, to connect, to tell the truth. To remember who they were, to speak up for themselves. They were discovering that it was not too late to say what they needed to. That was especially clear in their responses to the prompt, “What I want my words to do to you.” Here are some of the things they said:

“What I want my words to do is to help you see me as a human being, not the horrible mistake I made.”

“I want my words to let you in, to open a dialogue, to leave you with more questions than answers, to make you dissatisfied with simple explanations. I want them to make you wonder why so many people are locked up today in America’s prisons, and to make you wonder about your own prisons.”

“What I would like my words to do is to make you think about what you do with your life, to make you understand that life is short and beautiful, to make you think before you act.”

“I do not want my words to make you feel sorry for me, but to help you understand.”

“I want my words to make the past go away.”

“I want my words to be transformed into something other than what they started as. I want them to be sustenance for the change in your being.”

While there is something sad and convicting in these responses, there is also great hope in them. They speak to the creative and transformative power of words and the many things they can do. And they challenge us to be intentional with our own words and to ask ourselves this same question: “What do I want my words to do?”

This question has been quite helpful, for me, at least, as I keep trying to train my own tongue and to speak and act in a way

that is more congruent with my faith. When I've had the grace to remember it in the heat of the moment, as I'm about to fire off an angry email or say something I'll regret, it has helped me slow down and pay attention to my words and intentions; to the "you" on the other end of them; and to myself, to the deeper longings that are directing me.

It has helped me, for example, when I'm nagging my son about his college applications, again, to remember that what I really want my words to do is to protect and encourage him, to show him I care, and to squeeze in all the parenting I can while he's still home. When I'm arguing with my husband about politics, again, what I really want is to feel understood and respected—and to know that it's ok that we see things so differently.

Almost every time I've lost my temper and cussed, or said something mean, or gossiped, I was coming from a place of insecurity and hurt, myself—and what I wanted was for my words to protect me—to off-load some of my vulnerability onto someone else.

This is not the way of Christ, to be sure; and it does not reflect the way I want to be.

That's why confession and repentance are so important, too. Not because we never have ugly thoughts or feelings, or never say or do ugly things--but because we do, just like James said. But we do not have to be controlled or defined by them. While this practice, this question, can expose some difficult things about ourselves, it also can call us back to who we are, really, made in the likeness of God; and it can remind us that the other person, whoever that is, is also made in the likeness of God.

In fact, in light of James, we might even reframe the question from, "What do I want my words to do to you?" to "*What does the likeness of God in me want my words to do, to the likeness of God in you?*" As Christians, what we want our words to do is to bless both God *and* God's children and creation. To create and heal. To drive out darkness and hate, and to move us toward justice and understanding.

That may sound like a tall order for our small, seemingly insignificant words. But we know from scripture and experience that it *is* possible, with God's help: that healing for our world and ourselves just might begin with the care we take in the smallest things—with our words, and with our quiet care for others, and with our fumbling attempts to be the Christians we want to be.

What do you want your words to do?

[\[i\]](#) Madeleine Gavin, Judith Katz, Gary Sunshine, directors. *What I Want My Words to Do to You* (Borrowed Light LLC, 2003)