

Words

“What’s in your heart will be shown by your words.” James 3:3-12

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Creative Word

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God SAID, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.”¹ Then, who knows the details that came after that? At the sound of the Divine Voice: all creation exploding from a single point hurling matter and antimatter, photons and particles out toward the farthest reaches of space. At the sound of the Word: the forming of nebulae; stars; galaxies and planets; and this planet, Earth.

The voice sounds: and the planet expands and contracts, land rising and falling, the creation of oceans and seas and dry land; clouds of gases form as a violent planet is tamed and the waters become soups in which there will be life. And at the sound of the Voice, Earth is filled with plants and fish and birds of the air, the lion in the savanna and the penguin on the ice. The voice sounds and there is humanity growing, learning to live and love and become partners with God in this creative oratory that continues through the ages.

The Word uttered by the Architect and Artist of it all *makes* it all.

The early writers of the Bible understood words don’t just describe realities.

Words also make them.

Not just God’s Word; but our words, too. A judge sits on a bench hearing a case. Words from prosecution and defense vie for dominance, seeking to convince judge and jury that their description is truth. As of yet, though the accused is supposed to be innocent until proven guilty, there is no final reality until a decision is reached. Not until the judge raps the desk with the gavel and reads the pronouncement: “innocent!” Then innocent it is: innocence that’s made a reality created by the mere sounding of the word.

What is said can create something real. Since the mid ‘50’s such a word has been called *performative utterance*.² Words perform.

Two outs in the ninth inning, Armando Galarraga, pitching for the Tigers has a perfect game going: no hits, no walks. Jason Donald is up to bat, hits an infield grounder and the throw to Galarraga at first is in time. But that doesn't matter. Umpire Jim Joyce calls him, "Safe." And that is what creates the reality. That's baseball. That's performative utterance. The word creates.

A bride and groom have been growing in love for months, even years. A covenant has been forming, shaping their relationship, leading to their promise to unite for the rest of life. They stand before the congregation and the altar and repeat their vows. But they are not married until the pastor says "Now that Chris and Genna have given themselves to each other by solemn vows, with the joining of hands, and the giving and receiving of rings, I announce to you that they are husband and wife; in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Those whom God has joined together let no one put asunder." At the pronouncement of the word: that is the nanosecond that they are married.

SOMEDAY the NBA owners and players are finally going to get it together. A counter-counter-counter offer is going to be made and accepted and the basketball strike will look like it's over. But it won't be; and play won't start until it's written out in word and announced to the world.

Performative utterance: say some words and they create.

Tearing Down and Building Up

Or they can destroy. I knew a high school student who had excelled all her life. She was witty and creative and studied pretty well and all through school she got excellent grades. She excelled in music. She got along with people. She had an awareness of the world and you'd always know she'd have an opinion for anything. When she wrote papers, reports or creative writing, she'd almost always get the best of grades...

...Until she met up with an English teacher for a creative writing class who prided herself in being tough and demanding. Then, no matter how hard she tried she never got an A. She finally went to the teacher to see what she could do to improve her grade. The teacher just looked at her seriously and said, "I think you'll just have to accept that you will never be anything better than a *B* student."

The word can create. The word can destroy.

The student started to struggle in English. It was years before her creative edge came back.

Sometimes what the word creates can be a destructive reality. A professor was once speaking about this in one of my classes. I still remember him saying, "You call your wife *a nag* long enough and she will become one." She will, at least as far as the husband is concerned.

No matter what is true, reputations can be made or destroyed on the basis of what is said.

Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me might create some new courage when it's said. But usually it just isn't so.

Words can create. Words can destroy.

The writer of James joins philosophers from all over the world when he says, "How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire..."³ But he goes further. He says that your failure to control your speech is the very opposite of authentic religion.⁴

He reminds us that we are created in God's image. So the way God speaks will absolutely set the standard for the way we are to speak.

In the beginning, God said, "Let there be light." In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...full of grace and truth."⁵

The Word creates. The Word reveals. The Word redeems. That's the way God talks.

Creative, redeeming, building up: if you want to practice your faith, make your faith manifest in your living, then that's the way you'll talk.

James sees something of cosmic proportions going on in the wagging of our little tongues. Great good and great evil: both get unleashed through the things we say.

With (our tongues) we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.

It's inconsistent. It's like we are at odds with ourselves. You can almost hear James ask, "How does this work?"

It doesn't make sense.

Once or twice when I was little I got my mouth washed out with soap. I can't remember what I said. But I still remember the taste.

Sick perfume.

I'm glad it wasn't in the old days when soap was made out of lye.

But could that have been a cure? Could that which was foul simply be cleaned by washing the mouth through which whatever I said came? Because you and I both know that whatever I said didn't start in the mouth. The tongue was not the first organ to be at fault.

Because, really, whatever it was started in the heart.

Creative words, destructive words: all express the condition of the heart. And whatever is in the heart will be expressed by your tongue. Whatever you utter will reveal who you are; or for that moment it will reveal what is in control of you.

So, what James says leads us right to the condition of your faith. Examine what you say and you figure out your spiritual allegiances, spiritual health, and your spiritual maturity.

Examination, correction, discipline and control of what you say can get you to build up and not tear down. It can get you to being more and more like God; more and more like Jesus. Not that you have to have been perfect yesterday. You may even be troubled by something you just said. But you examine it, practice it, correct it and keep trying. And by the grace of God (which is what you need; you can't do this on your own)...by the grace of God you will get there.

Spiritual aerobics. It's just good practice for a healthy heart.

Blessing

I walked into Uncle Bud's Catfish Shack in Nashville, I guess to get greased up. Fried catfish and chicken, hushpuppies, corn bread and sorghum molasses, corn on the cob. Not exactly your best cholesterol food, but somehow good for the soul. The ceiling was made of suspended truckers' caps hanging from hooks wall-to-wall. And on the walls were posters with pithy sayings. Some I won't repeat, not during worship at least. But one of them seemed like sage advice:

It's better to leave people wondering why you didn't say anything than to leave them wondering why you did.

Let there be light.

You are safe.

You can do it!

You are redeemed.

You are loved.

You belong.

May you show it by the things you say.

May you become pure of speech and pure of heart.

¹ Genesis 1:1-3

² Austin, J.L. *How to Do Things with Words* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962. [ISBN 0-19-824553-X](#). See also, "Performative Utterance," *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Performative_utterance.

³ Johnson, Luke Timothy, "The Letter of James," *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* vol. XII. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 1998. P 203.

⁴ *Ibid.* p 204.

⁵ Genesis 1:1; John 1:1, 14.