

The words we speak create the world we inhabit, so what kind of world do you want to live in? Today is our last week in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, as next week is Transfiguration Sunday, after which Lent begins. Over the last 2 weeks, we've witnessed Jesus use his words to create a whole new world for us to dwell, a world that he calls the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven, it turns out, is not a place we go to when we die. It's what happens when this world is as God intends it to be. By the end of his sermon, Jesus will describe it as a world in which we love our enemies, in which we practice non-violence and generosity. It's a world in which we stop judging each other and do unto others as you would have them do to you. This Jesus says, is what the Law and Prophets are all about. In **the kingdom of heaven**, we recognize each other as all belonging to the family of God. This is why Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz renamed it the kin-dom of God, wherein we take our place in the kinship of all creation. Another name for the kindom is what Dr. King called the Beloved Community. This is the end goal of Jesus' sermon and ministry, the establishment of the Beloved Community.

Last week Jesus said those incredible words, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world." In speaking of our identity, Jesus says nothing about our sin, not a word. Instead, he says how valuable we are, that who we are is the stuff of God, that the divine light shines in and through you. You are not merely made by God but of God, the divine image dwells in you. It's all so amazing and refreshingly positive that you might be tempted to think Jesus is teaching us something completely new. But he makes it clear that's not what he's doing, saying, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." Jesus has not come to reveal a different God but to reveal how God has felt about you the whole time. You just didn't know it. Or as Richard Rohr says, Jesus didn't come to change how God feels about us but to change how we feel about God. Because to God, you've always been the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

Jesus hasn't come to play fast and loose with God's law, but neither has he come to merely restate it. Instead, he has come to fulfill God's law, to fill it up and fill it out, to bring God's law to its intended purpose, and that purpose has always been human flourishing. Laws are made for humans not humans for laws. God gives us commandments, not just to see if we will obey but that we might flourish and become wise. Jesus continues, "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Now, I used to read this and think, I'm in trouble. Because my righteousness isn't all that great and certainly doesn't exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. Those people knew a thing or two about obedience and moral purity, and there's no way I can exceed them. But Jesus' point is not that we need to finally get serious about obedience. He's saying we need a different kind of **righteousness, one that puts relationships above rules.**

If we think back to Advent, we heard Joseph's story in Matthew 1 where he decided to divorce Mary quietly when she was found to be pregnant. For showing her mercy, Joseph was called righteous. From the first chapter of Matthew, we see that righteousness is about putting relationships ahead of rules. If Joseph blindly followed the rules, then Mary would be publicly shamed or worse. But he doesn't. Joseph treats Mary with respect and honor, even when he thinks she's been unfaithful to him. Jesus learns from Joseph that

righteousness is about honoring others, even those who have wronged us, and he wants us to do the same. He says, “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder,’ and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment, and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council, and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.” There’s so much more that God wants for us than simply following the letter of the law. While most of us will never murder anyone, thank God, Jesus says that we kill each other every day in our hearts and with our words. Does anyone think he’s wrong?

We live in an age of rage and contempt, where we not only disagree with others, we despise them, and this creates hell on earth. When Jesus says we are liable to the hell of fire, he’s not talking about a post-mortem destination. He uses the word “Gehenna,” not to be confused with Gahanna. **Gehenna was the literal trash pit that burned outside Jerusalem.** You can visit it to this day. So, he’s not threatening us with a punishment liable upon death. He’s saying that our words create a hell that burns us alive here and now. Isn’t that just true? Dr. John Gottman is a psychologist at the University of Washington, and he can famously watch couples interact for just a few minutes and determine with 94% accuracy whether they will still be together in three years. Interestingly, it’s not the absence of conflict that determines a couple’s longevity. It’s their level of contempt. If one partner expresses contempt for the other through something as simple as an eye roll, they are not likely to last.

What’s true on the personal level is also true on the public level as well. The insults we hear in our public discourse are so frequent that they barely register anymore. A few years ago, someone yelling, “You lie” to the President in the State of the Union address was shocking and shameful. Now, it barely registers. Many Christians instead of resisting the language of contempt have instead relished it. I don’t think any of us are immune from this pull, do you? It’s conduct unbecoming of the salt and light of the world, and it’s affecting our children as well. Multiple studies have linked how when public leaders use contemptuous speech, there is a corresponding rise in bullying in our schools. Does this surprise anyone? When children witness adults use contemptuous, hateful speech, they do the same, and this creates hell for our children. How do you speak about those with whom you disagree? I’m glad you don’t murder them, but do you harbor anger toward them, and call them fools or snowflakes, racists, or fascists? The righteousness that exceeds the scribes and the Pharisees is the righteousness that affirms our kinship with all people, even those with whom we most adamantly disagree. **Kindom speech doesn’t create hell for others, but instead reforges the bond we share, even amidst disagreement.**

In this time of deep polarization, we cannot control what other people say and do. We can only control what we say and do. What kind of world will you create with the words you speak? Will your words create hell for yourself and others, or will you create a world in which we all belong, even if we don’t all agree? Will your speech reflect the fact that you are the salt of the earth and the light of the world? This is who you are. You are made by the God who has always only loved you from beginning to end, but not just you. God has always only loved your neighbors from beginning to end too, not just those neighbors with whom you agree, but those with whom you most adamantly disagree. If God loves them, then so can you. That’s the logic of Jesus’ teaching. If God sees us all as more valuable than we know, then there’s no place for contempt in our words or actions. To belittle others is to belittle

God, for God dwells in them just as much as God dwells in you. It's that simple, and it's that hard.

You might mess up, more than once, but that's OK. Then you can experience that extraordinary gift, the joy of being wrong. You can leave your gift at the altar and be reconciled by using those powerful, world-changing words, "I'm sorry. I was wrong. Will you forgive me?" There's such joy in being wrong, for there we find humility, and in humility we discover our humanity. Our words create the world we inhabit. The truth is that God speaks so highly of you. God treasures you. So, in this place, at this church, in this community, may our speech toward our neighbors reflect God's speech toward us. May we use our words to create a world where we all can belong, the kingdom of God, the Beloved Community. That's the world I want to inhabit. That's the world we were made for.