



By Whose Authority Do You Speak?

Deuteronomy 18:18b & 20b

©Rev. Joyce Shin
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“Think before you speak.” “God gave us two ears, but only one mouth, for a reason.” “Confucius says, ‘Silence is golden.’” These are sayings that I heard growing up, warning me against the folly of speaking indiscriminately. Mostly they were warnings that my father would say to me.

Now, hearing what Moses said to Israel, I am starkly reminded of the seriousness of speaking. Reminding the people of Israel that they, not wanting ever again to hear the voice of the Lord or to see God’s terrifying pillar of fire, thinking that they would die, if they did, and that, therefore, God raised up for them an intermediary in the prophets, Moses tells them what God warned. “Any prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, or who presumes to speak in my name a word that I have not commanded the prophet to speak - that prophet shall die.”

Oh my gosh. This is a serious violation. To speak any word that God has not commanded you to speak is a serious offense and has serious consequence. You may be feeling quite at ease in these next fifteen minutes, but I am going to proceed with caution.

Theology - speaking about God - is serious business, and when we engage in it, we have to be extremely careful that we aren’t speaking *for* God. To do so would lack the absolute humility that God requires. This is the humility that Moses exhibited when God told him that he was going to be sent to Pharaoh to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Questioning God, Moses said to God, “O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” Even after the Lord assured him, saying, “Who gives speech to mortals? . . . Is it not I, the Lord? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak,” Moses said to God, “Behold, the sons of Israel have not listened to me; how then will Pharaoh listen to me, for I am unskilled in speech?” Three times, Moses tried to excuse himself by saying that he was shy about and not skilled in public speaking. Recognizing the high calling it was to speak for God, Moses felt inadequate.

Yet, according to the book of Deuteronomy, “never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face” (34:10). It seems that though he was not comfortable speaking in public, he was the one with whom God spoke face to face and that this, more than anything, was what distinguished Moses as the greatest prophet. God spoke with Moses face to face.

There is a new book out, entitled *How We Talk*, by N. J. Enfield. It is a book about the inner workings of conversation. N. J. Enfield is a professor of linguistics at the University of Sydney. Like most linguists, he wants to know: “What is it that humans have, and that animals lack, that explains why only our species has language”? Unlike most scholars of linguistics, who study written language - its vocabulary and its grammar, Dr. Enfield studies language as it can be observed in conversations. Conversation, after all, is the medium in which language is most often used and from which even written language is derived. When we fail to observe the use of language in conversations, we fail to notice and note utterances like “um,” “uh,” and “mm-hmm.” In his own specialized research of the Lao language, Dr. Enfield found that the word “huh” is spoken on average every six minutes in conversation, making it one of the most frequently used words in the Lao language. And yet, it does not appear in the authoritative two-volume Lao-English dictionary that was published in 1972. It turns out that the word for “huh” is common not only in the Lao language, but also in languages all over the world. He makes this point by saying that were a Martian to observe the earth’s speakers, the Martian would see the hallmarks of conversation in the same form everywhere: a rapid system of turn-taking in which, mostly, one person is talking at a time; an exquisite sensitivity to the passage of time in dialogue, with a

universal one-second window defining subtle distinctions between being early, on time, or late to respond; and a heavy reliance on small utterances such as “mm-hmm,” “um,” “uh” and “Huh?” to orchestrate the proceedings.

These are the features common to all human conversation and not to be found in communication among any other species. If we want to understand the true genius of language, we need to take seriously and appreciatively the things we utter in a stuttering way, or at least in such ineloquent ways that we never noted them before. These are the things that reveal how conversation is about cooperation - about showing agreement, showing consideration, taking time, taking turns, catching and repairing misunderstandings.

The longer I am in ministry, the more I appreciate conversations, the more I appreciate the cooperative power of these almost unnoticeable utterances that make up our conversations. I don't know if you have yet had a conversation with our Minister of Music, Meghan Meloy Ness. Not to make her too self-conscious, I nevertheless think it valuable to point out her very wise use of these utterances. A conversation with Meghan always ends in remarkable cooperation.

Isn't it interesting that Moses, the man who likely stuttered or was often at a loss for words in public, but because he likely used a lot of “ums” and “uhs” in face-to-face conversation with God, became the greatest prophet in Israel's history?

When Michael and I were on the verge of getting our daughter a smart phone for the first time, we felt the need to lay out the importance of selecting the right mode of communication for the content to be communicated. Some things, we explained, are communicated better by email than by text, while other things are communicated better by phone than by either email or text, and some things should be communicated only in person, face to face. We told her that it is really hard to make those judgments, not to be lazy about them, and that people, even adults, make messy mistakes all the time on this front. Even though we went on and on about this, it did not occur to me at the time to say that certain modes of communication do not make space for the “hms” and “ums” and “uhs” that are so crucial for human cooperation.

Fine-tuning and -timing, taking turns, and repairing - these are not allowed by some modes of communication, and without them serious damage can be done. So, it makes sense, doesn't it, that God would entrust God's words only to someone with whom he had face-to-face conversation?

In Susan Cain's book *Quiet*, Susan Cain writes about political activist Mahatma Gandhi. According to his autobiography, in his early years Gandhi was simply too shy to speak up or out. Though he was able to speak one-on-one with people, he found himself reluctant to open his mouth whenever he was with a group. Once, a member of a committee that he was elected to lead even said to him, “You talk to me quite all right, but why is it that you never open your lips at a committee meeting?” Even in his later years, avoiding speech-making whenever he could, and staying on script when he couldn't, Gandhi learned to manage his shyness, but never overcame it.

What started out as reluctance, however, eventually became self-restraint. Gandhi tells about the time when, as a young man, he decided to travel to England to study law. The leaders of his caste were against this, because they believed that it would be impossible for him to be a vegetarian in England. When Gandhi decided that the caste should not interfere in his decision,

Boom! He was excommunicated. . . . The community was divided over how to handle him. One camp embraced him; the other cast him out. This meant that Gandhi was not allowed even to eat or drink at the homes of fellow caste members, including his own sister and his mother- and father-in-law.

Rather than calling out the injustice and fighting against it, Gandhi followed the caste leaders' orders and kept a distance even from his own family members. In time, those who excommunicated him stopped bothering him, and later even helped him in his political work. About this, Gandhi wrote

that all these good things are due to my non-resistance. Had I agitated for being re-admitted to the caste, had I attempted to divide it into more camps, had I provoked the caste men, they would surely have retaliated, and instead of steering clear of the storm, I should . . . have found myself in a whirlpool of agitation (199).

Over the course of his life, again and again Gandhi made decisions to accept what other people would have challenged. When, for instance, Gandhi was a young lawyer in South Africa and applied for admission to the local bar, the Law Society, not wanting Indian members, tried to thwart his application. Their tactics enraged Gandhi, but he didn't let his feelings show. Instead he patiently negotiated until the Law Society agreed to a compromise. But when the day arrived for him to stand and take the oath, the chief justice ordered him to remove his turban. Knowing that he was justified in resisting this order, he nevertheless took off his turban. This upset his friends, who said he was weak and that he should have stood up for his beliefs. But Gandhi saw it as restraint, and "restraint, Gandhi believed, was one of his greatest assets. Listen to what he wrote:

I have naturally formed the habit of restraining my thoughts. A thoughtless word hardly ever escaped my tongue or pen. Experience has taught me that silence is part of the spiritual discipline of a votary of truth. We find so many people impatient to talk. All this talking can hardly be said to be of any benefit to the world. It is so much waste of time. My shyness has been in reality my shield and buckler. It has allowed me to grow. It has helped me in my discernment of truth.

Over time, what started out as shy reluctance grew into self-restraint, and restraint opened up to Gandhi and the many who followed him the spiritual discipline necessary for non-violent change that speaking - speaking out against every injustice - would have made impossible.

There are some things that are made possible only when we hold our tongue. It is, to be sure, counter-intuitive, not natural in the least. It goes against our nature, when we think we know something, to refrain from calling it out and making it known. This is a theme that runs throughout the gospel of Mark, as Mark tells us story after story in which Jesus rebukes those who fail to hold their tongues about who they think he is. By the things they say and when they say them, it is clear that they have failed to grasp Jesus' true identity and mission.

The story we read this morning is the first of many such instances. In it, Jesus is teaching in the synagogue, already amazing everyone who is present. They can sense that he is something else. Interrupting his teaching is a man possessed with an unclean spirit, causing the man to call out, "Jesus of Nazareth, I know who you are, the Holy One of God." Immediately rebuking the unclean spirits, Jesus says, "Be silent, and come out of him!" Here, at the start of Mark's gospel, is Jesus' first act of healing, and it is to silence the unclean spirits that have possessed a man.

Mid-way through the gospel, Jesus even rebukes his disciple Peter for speaking out with misunderstanding about who he thinks Jesus is. To Peter, Jesus says, "Get behind me, Satan." Throughout his ministry, Jesus goes around amazing people by what he teaches and does, and yet it seems that he resists the assumptions made by people on the basis of their amazement. It is not until the end of the gospel, when, having heard Jesus's cry and facing Jesus as he died, the centurion confesses, "Truly this man was God's Son," that there is no rebuke. The only time when, finally, a statement identifying Jesus's identity is not silenced is when Jesus hangs on the cross, his sacrifice plain to see.

There are some things that can be revealed only in silence. Jesus' self-sacrifice on the cross was one of those things. The truth about Jesus was revealed not by his teachings, not by his deeds, not by all those things that amazed the crowds and spread his fame, but by his self-sacrifice. It would have been different if Jesus, while being interrogated by Pontius Pilate, or while making his way to Golgotha, or while hanging on the cross, had called out every wrong that had been committed, every person who had betrayed him. Had he spoken out in this way, I suspect that we wouldn't be following Christ today.

There is so much injustice to speak out against. This is true. It was true for Gandhi. It was true for Peter. It was true for Israel. And it was true for Jesus. We have to take care not to equate our speaking with God's speaking. When we are tempted to claim too quickly that we know the will of God and that we know what Christ would do, we have to take heed of Moses' warning and Jesus' rebuke. The warning and the rebuke, casting out all that works us up into a frenzy, all that causes us to rant and rage, make space for us to come into God's presence, to talk with God, with our "ums" and "uhs" and to see Jesus face to face.

Former professor of Christian Communication at Yale Institute of Sacred Music, Thomas Troeger, has taken the story of Jesus' silencing rebuke and has written a hymn about it, entitled "Silence! Frenzied, Unclean Spirit." It is #181 in our hymnal. In place of the hymn listed in our bulletin, let us sing Thomas Troeger's Hymn #181.