

As I read this morning's gospel reading, I thought of another story, the medieval tale of Parzival and the Holy Grail, a story that I heard while on retreat in Chartres, France during my sabbatical. The retreat was entitled: "Wisdom Stories on the Path"—the path of life and the path of the labyrinth. We discussed the telling and hearing of stories that speak to our hearts, that reflect aspects of our lives and guide us on our often-complicated paths

At the heart of the Parzival's story and at the heart of our being is human speech or speaking. In this story, the essential heroic deed is an act of speech, because you see, when Parzival first "happens upon" the castle of the dying king, the Grail stone is providing the people with food. But everyone is hoping that Parzival is wise enough to ask a question, the question that must be asked to heal the king and unleash the nourishing power of the Grail throughout the kingdom.

This morning I invite you into a vision of speech that is possible for us, speech that nourishes us and others, speech that connects one person to another through the divine love and truth that dwell in our hearts. We speak to express, name and communicate something. Speaking or language doesn't, however, refer only to spoken words but also to sounds, tone of voice, sign language, gestures, facial expressions, tears, laughter, and eloquent silences (1).

This morning, the story of Parzival and the gospel story focus on words that come out of our mouths, words that are spoken and heard face to face. I encourage you to imagine the accompanying gestures, facial expressions, voice tones, silences, and even sign language.

The Parzival story that I heard was the version written in the 12th century by Wolfram von Eschenbach, a Christian knight and poet. He was fully aware of Christ as the divine Word made human, fully aware of the resonances of Parsifal's journey with Scripture and God's call to service. So, an inner sense of truth in speaking has everything to do with Christ as the Word living within the heart of each of us.

In the beginning of his story, Wolfram writes: "A man slowly wise... thus I hail my hero." Parzival's journey—and ours-- is not about achieving perfection but about learning to recognize and relate more wisely to imperfection, specifically the imperfection in our use --and misuse --of speech (2).

Parzival's father was a fine knight who was killed in battle. Parzival's mother, rejecting the world of knights, battles and sorrows, takes her son to most remote area possible to live. He doesn't know who he is, his lineage or even his name, but he does form a special connection to the natural world, to animals, birds singing, and hunting one day, Parzival sees 4 knights in splendid armor, and riding horses; he asks them all kinds of questions, and they urge him to become a knight in King Arthur's court!

His mother is horrified and gives him four seemingly practical pieces of advice: 1) cross rivers only in shallow water, 2) be polite and greet people, 3) follow the teaching of older, grey-haired men, and 4) whenever possible, win a good woman's ring by kissing and embracing her. (The first two are helpful, the last two get Parzival into trouble!)

Naïve, ignorant, insensitive, and awkward, Parzival blunders and blabbers his way through encounters and obstacles. He speaks as he's been taught to speak, not knowing what he really means, not recognizing the consequences of what he says, he doesn't listen or understand clearly what others say to him, no real communication happens.

In the words that Jesus uses, much of what comes out of Parzival's mouth does defile---hurt others, make unholy what was holy, ruin, humiliate, damage reputation of a woman, ---through ignorance, greed, thoughtlessness, insensitivity, and lack of compassion. But I don't think that Parizival knows himself or the world well enough to have evil intentions, adultery, false witness or slander in his heart. Still, the effect and consequences are the same; he must take responsibility for what he says and does as he follows his yearning to become a knight.

Parzival then meets an older grey-haired knight, who gives him an ethical code upon which to base his speech and actions. The words of advice are good, except for one: *Don't ask too many questions*. How can we live without questions that arise from deep within us and stretch us to fly in the far beyond? (3)

Alas, the first time that Parzival "happens upon" the Grail stone in the castle of the dying king, he takes the old grey-haired knight's words way too literally and remains completely silent. Even though he wants to exclaim in awe and ask a million questions, he says nothing. Once outside the castle gate, Parzival is rejected and told in no uncertain terms: *Ride on.. and bear the hatred of the sun. You are a goose.* And "*You were too faint of heart to ask a question.*" (4) And a great silence begins in Parzival's life. But he will speak again.

In our gospel story, Jesus called the crowd to him and spoke, saying: Listen and understand--*It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.* The crowd, disciples and Peter have trouble understanding the meaning of his words, and Jesus is frustrated. There have been arguments about Jewish food laws—and about eating with unwashed hands. For Jesus, what matters to God is how you speak to one another; what matters is the creation of holy, loving relationships!

Jesus says: *What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart.* I'm not sure if that is always true, because there are times when our speech isn't really connected to the love and truth in our hearts, to the person we are and yearn to be. We say foolish, thoughtless, and heartless things. We may be speaking what we've heard from our mothers or fathers, authority figures, or social media, but the speech doesn't fit the situation or the timing. We may be spilling out some of our emotional baggage that we never examined or cleared out.

In the course of our lives, there is often the need for some kind of separation, leaving or letting go of what is familiar and known to grow and mature in our understanding of ourselves and others (5). A first separation often happens when we physically leave our childhood home. Throughout our lives, we should sort out and question teachings that may no longer be appropriate or true for us or for the particular situation and time. Today, I think of conversations we are having about racism and white privilege that have called me to go within and look at some unexamined attitudes that I may be expressing in my speaking.

This is what Jesus urges his disciples to do, when they respond to his words by asking: *Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said? Do you know that your words go against the words of our religious leaders, whose words that we have followed all our lives—and told our children?'* Peter and others still don't understand Jesus when he talks about blind guides leading the blind, and both falling into the pit.

And right after this dialogue comes another dialogue—perhaps the most beautiful and most disturbing dialogue in Scripture. Because Jesus goes away into unknown territory, a non-Jewish region, probably to rest, but instead what comes out of his mouth goes completely against his own teaching, what comes out of his mouth gives concrete evidence of words that defile. A Canannite woman, unclean and unworthy according to Jewish religious doctrine of that time, comes out and starts shouting: *Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.*

But he does not answer her at all--is this a condemning silence? Does he look dismayed or disgusted? Or is he shocked and momentarily stymied? It is his disciples who speak, urging him to send this noisy pest away.

Instead, Jesus proclaims aloud the doctrine and inner pattern of thought that he has followed all his life: *I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.* Is his tone harsh or gentle? This is a different world, however; this woman persists. She comes closer, kneels before him, *Lord, help me.* She names him as *Lord, Son of David.* Still, Jesus' human heart resists and voices rigid doctrine and the arrogant words of a derisive master, who views this woman as a dog unworthy even of the leftovers from God's table. I don't think that Jesus had any evil intentions but the results are the same—defiling, degrading, humiliating, making unholy what is holy.

What an amazing, marvelous, disruptive debate—the kind in which Jesus loved to engage! And he listens, oh he listens attentively to what this woman reveals to him, saying that even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table, from the overflowing abundance of God's feast.

Wow. The transformative power of speech and images and an imaginative faith, the power of goodness emerging from a completely unexpected source, the honest and true heart of a woman from the alien culture of Israel's enemy.

Yes, we hear what is possible, we perceive the vision, for Christ is indeed the Word in human form, alert, aware and awakened. In his humanity, he recognizes the imperfection in his speech and the truth of this woman's perceptive words. I believe that he goes deeper within, knowing that he was sent to speak words that heal, that bring nourishment to those who are suffering. This is a time for separation, the letting go of certain kinds of familiar speech, a time for clearing away untruths and speaking what his heart knows: God's abundant love and compassion.

And so, Jesus speaks: *Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.* And her daughter was healed---and the nourishment flowed through Jesus and the woman -and beyond to others ready to serve and speak the speech of the Grail.

I am going to leave you hanging until next Sunday to hear the question that Parzival was expected to ask of the dying fisher king, the question that would bring healing---and that would lead to two more questions. In the meantime, I invite you to notice your speech or speaking every day this coming week: not only what you say but how you say it and why you say it. Every now and then, pause and ask yourself: did my words express the divine goodness and love that live in my heart? Then simply consider any imperfection; this is holy work, worthy of those who serve God by seeking to speak compassion and nourish the world.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

NOTES

Sussman, Linda. *The Speech of the Holy Grail*. Lindisfarne Books (United States, 1995).

1. Kindle, pp.6-7.
2. Kindle, p.14
3. Kindle, p.46
4. Kindle, pp.67-8
5. Kindle, pp.27-8