

July 15, 2018 Youth Sunday
Peace Lutheran Church
Austin, TX

Good morning

So if you hadn't heard, today is youth Sunday. Our youth have recently returned from the National youth gathering in Houston, where the theme was "This changes everything".

So I was kind of amused and a little bewildered when looking at today's gospel. A story about an execution? How do I put together a gospel story like the one today with an event like youth Sunday and the National youth gathering? Well strap in, and let's see how this goes.

This story is about the power of words. Let's take a look. The story starts with King Herod, and the words he's dealing with, specifically, rumors about Jesus, his disciples, and John the Baptist. Herod is reeling with regret over the words of his people, and the words that urged him to execute John the Baptist.

You see John the Baptist was all about words. Water, and the word, to be specific. John is making trouble for Herod with his words, as he scrutinizes Herod's immorality. While Herod is angered by John, the words of John the Baptist are so powerful and compelling, he can't find the resolve to kill him.

Later on, we find that Herod's words give power to a woman named Herodias, and those words come back to bite him. On top of that, Herodias's Mother's words speak through her daughter to call for the death of John the Baptist.

Finally the words of bad news find the disciples who take away and bury the body of John. Words. The awesome and terrible power of words. This story in particular really shows not only how powerful words can be, but how many different ways words can work for good or ill. Words first bring shame and fear to Herod, and his shame and fear also brought death to John the Baptist.

John the Baptist's words bring awe and wonder to those who hear it, and his words cut like a knife to those who couldn't stand to hear the truth. He commands respect from even his enemies through his words, and he brings people to repentance through word and the waters of baptism.

Herodias is given great power by Herod's words, and by the words of her mother, those words of power can kill.
Words words words.

All these words remind me of a conversation I once had with a Pastor when I was working at Camp Chrysalis. In that conversation we spoke about what it means to be created in the image of God. When I asked her what makes humanity most like God, she replied with, "our ability to speak and use words"

You see, in Genesis, God created the entire universe by the power of God's word. I think we all can remember the first words God speaks, "let there be light". God speaks words, and big things happen. In the beginning of the Gospel of John, we hear the words "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God." God not only uses words, but God is the word. We dwell in that word all the time, whether we hear words from the Bible, are given counsel from our Pastors, or even if we walk upon the earth God created, our universe is saturated with God's word.

That Pastor told me that we also have this same power, this same word. When we speak, we create our universe, in a way. Our words can build and destroy, create or break down, give power or take away power, or even give life or bring death. When we use words to build someone up, it can help change who they are for the better. When we use words to hurt someone, we can damage them in ways that might never heal. Our perceptions of our families, friends, places of business, churches, restaurants, or even our country or our world can change based on either our own words, or the words of others.

This story helps us to remember the powerful nature of words. It's a testament to our ability to use words for righteousness or for our own reputations. How our words can bring back memories of past events, and dictate the future yet to come.

All of these words reminded me of our experience at the National Youth gathering. When you take away all the walking, driving, and eating you do while you're there, what you're left with is mostly words and experiences. Each night at the Mass Gathering, we heard powerful words from great speakers about their experiences with God, and how God had changed their life. At night, the youth would share a devotion with one another and recount what their favorite part of the day was, and where they saw God in their day.

Here to share some powerful words with us are Katie, Emily, and Jordan. They will speak about their transformative experiences in Houston where they felt the word of God present in themselves and their peers.

Let's welcome Katie, Emily, and Jordan.

Thank you again Katie, Emily, and Jordan for sharing your words today.

While our Gospel story today is mostly about how words can be used for evil and death, we can also remember the good news. While the world is filled with powerfully negative words, Jesus gives us good news and life-giving word. You can find that word in the Bible, in the words of the hymns in liturgy of the church. Good news can also be found in the words of a good friend or family member, or in the words of our young people.

When we hear the good news, we should find time to appreciate it and ponder its meaning. When we hear bad news, we should ask for God's grace to see us through it.

Most of all we should measure our words carefully and speak with intentionality and thoughtfulness. If we can speak with grace, and listen with even more grace, we can share God's words of Good News as well.

Amen.