

Jesus said to the gathered crowd: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished...

For example, "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.'

But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'You empty headed idiot,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell...

Further, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

*If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be whole, perfect, complete, therefore,
as your heavenly Father is whole... perfect...complete (Matthew 5)."*

So, it's Lent.

It's the time in the Christian calendar when people in the Christian take 40 days to give up or add on something small in order to grow in their relationships with others and with God. Now whether Lent is a part of your tradition or not, I want to suggest something very small that you – whoever you are – can decide to give up or add to your life that can make a huge difference in your relationship with God and your One Team schoolmates, your family members, your friends. What is this small thing? Very simple; it's a word – not just one word but every word that you use – with your friends, teammates, and family. Because while some words are pretty innocuous, others have great power to harm or to heal. In fact, some are so powerful that we can really say that they are as powerful as our actions. Yes, it's true. Words can be as powerful as deeds.

I learned this most pointedly with a best friend of mine that I met in 7th Grade, lifted weights with 6 days a week, and played football with for four or five years.

For the purpose of this story, my friend's name was David, but everyone, and I mean everyone in my Big Public High School, called him BIG Dave – because he was huge, a good athlete, could be very goofy, and he was really funny. 6'3", 225...and always looking for a way to laugh.

Sometimes we also shared classes, but we approached those classes very differently. When I say we approached classes differently, I have to say that Big Dave is one of the smartest people I've ever known. We used to lift weights in his garage, and over the course of one long hot summer, I watched him take a lawnmower apart and put it back together, with no instructions...in fact, he was so smart that in our big public school, he was able to do most of his homework in school. In fact, he was the one who joked that doing too much homework was against his religion.

Meanwhile, IN School, Dave did lots of experiments. We sat in the back of math class and an indoor houseplant sat on a small table between us, next to the window. From about the second week of school, he brought in a notebook to determine what variables helped the plant grow or die: the angle of the sun, the number of hours of exposure, the dampness of the soil, what vitamins or minerals he'd inject it with from time to time. That's right, he was actually doing science, but not in biology class. Dave did science in math.

On the other hand, I was always a kid who did ALL my homework, moved in a very linear way through school, and did my very best to get top results. I did science in science and math in math. One thing we had in common was that we loved football, another was that we loved lifting weights and a third was we made each other laugh...a lot.

Then one day, I said something that was not so funny. Working on a new concept in math class, and because he always got everything before I did, I kept trying to explain it to him and could not believe that he was not getting it. So rather offhandedly, I said, in what I thought was a joking way, "Dave, don't be so STUPID..."

Well, he looked down with a very weary look, then looked up and said with utter seriousness, "Listen, if you want to stand up and walk out of this class into the hall, then call me stupid again...and we will fight." I understood that I had blown it. That I had not seen all along that it really did matter to him how he did in school and that I had not understood how he might have been seeing my surface level success...and boy was he angry. The word I had used with my friend – "Stupid" – did as much harm or even more harm than if I had hit him.

Now remember that I asked you to pay attention to the inverted set of crimes and punishments that we just read in Jesus' Sermon on the

Mount? Jesus warns that words can be as powerful as actions and does so in an interesting way. When talking about a series of words and deeds, He assigns increasingly stringent punishments for what at first seem like lesser crimes. Listen again...

For example, "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'You empty-headed idiot,' is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell..."

Now do you see why Jesus tells people that saying "You Fool" will put a person in danger of the fire of hell when being really angry with someone or committing to calling someone empty-headed brings lesser punishments? It's because he's telling us that our words are as powerful as our emotions and even as powerful as our deeds. As such, if we get in the habit of saying "you fool!," we can very easily end up with violence on our hands. A mean word can be the equivalent of a violent act...and it prevents us from our higher calling, which is to love one another.

No wonder the Prophet Muhammed, the founder of Islam famously said, "Shall I tell you how to possess all this (arms outstretched to indicate the world)? Keep this (hold tongue with fingers) under control."

No wonder the Buddha made "Right Speech" one of the 8 MUST DO actions, one step on the 8 Fold Path of his new religious tradition...and on the way to that, pointed out something super important: that the words and judgments and loose words we use in referring to others, and the mindset that those words come from...we always always always end up secretly, quietly using against

ourselves. Every time you use a phrase, even jokingly, that can hurt someone else, you're building up a superior image of yourself that will eventually disappoint you and cause you suffering too. When I call you stupid, I set myself up for always having to be smart, and nobody can be "smart" forever. If I'm judgemental in that way towards others, I'll always end up judging myself harshly when I don't measure up.

So let's use this Lent to take stock of the language we're using in public, in private with our friends, and online. As ONE TEAM, we should be able to elevate our game to a level where every single person in our school and every single person who knows our school is buoyed up by the language that we use.

Do you think that yelling the F-Bomb under the tents is harmless? Wait until you explain that to the Kindergartener walking by with their classmates.

Think it's no problem to call someone gay? Wait until 20 minutes or 20 years later when a friend of yours says, "That's not okay. You did not know it, but that messed up my day, my week, my year."

Think it's no big deal to appropriate the N-Word and fling it around as if that's yours to use? I can tell you straight up that your friends may not call you on it, but that there are people nearby who think you are totally out of line.

I'm not sure what it is for you and for me, but what I can tell you 'Iolani is that we've got to watch out for our language. We need to elevate our language if we want to get right with others and with the God of Love. We need to elevate and cultivate our language if we want to grow up together. We need to elevate, cultivate, and renovate our language if we want to live into the true meaning of ONE TEAM. Yes, it's something that we should do, but even better, it's something that we have an opportunity to do.

And back in that math classroom, after my friend said “you wanna go fight?” There was a great silence. I felt awful. I was a little scared, but he was my friend and my teammate, so I said, “No, I don’t want to fight. You’re not what I said. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” Not another word was spoken that entire day. We walked out of the class one after the other in silence.

And the next day, when we arrived, Big Dave cracked a joke and asked me about that plant that he was injecting...and that day and every day since that day, it’s like nothing ever happened. I was so relieved. We’re still best friends.

But after a lot of reflection this week, I now realize that – had Big Dave not been Big Dave, had our friendship not been so strong, had all this NOT happened between the two of us at the back of a math classroom but instead out under the chapel tents among a group of friends, or much worse, on social media for everybody in the world to see...

I now realize that the whole episode could have turned out differently for both of us...and much worse. That would have been a version of hell for me.

Language is powerful. Words are like deeds that can be used to hurt or heal. Bless or Curse.

Let’s make sure that we’re using them in ways that benefit us all.

Amen.

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