

**Sermon notes:** Feb 16, 2020 **Focus:** “three sieves” help us talk less, talk better

**All readings** [https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA\\_RCL/Epiphany/AEpi6\\_RCL.html](https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Epiphany/AEpi6_RCL.html)

I’m not afraid of uncomfortable topics like hell, adultery, and divorce. However, I think the call to “right speech” in the gospel has important impact on us and worth our reflection. The way we talk about each other and *to* each other needs renewal. We will be changed through a deeper understanding of this gospel text. This is true when we practice what Jesus preached during his Sermon on the Mount. The text today is near the end of Matthew’s recounting of this sermon.

If you have heard the term “the sermon on the mount” a million times but not exactly sure what it is, go to wikipedia for a primer [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sermon\\_on\\_the\\_Mount](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sermon_on_the_Mount)

**Verses today** *“Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord.’ But I say to you, Do not swear at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth... Let your word be ‘Yes, Yes’ or ‘No, No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one.”*

**Jesus is direct** - Prattle less, swear less, talk less -- it seems. He says we shouldn’t swear by created things like heaven and earth. Don’t do like my friends in Oklahoma in the late 1970’s. I lost count of how many times one would lie after saying, “I swear on a stack of bibles that I am not lying.” Jesus wants us to do the right thing for others and swearing we will get to it at some point. In other words, don’t swear on your grandmother’s grave or your master’s degree from Stanford because all of it distracts you from hearing, seeing and acting on the deep needs of your community. Taking oaths and swearing is usually is a screen for your own lying tendencies (I am looking at you --- all of us)

**True community** A New Testament professor at Princeton, Eric Barreto, has written on the broad strokes of this text. I find it to be helpful. Link to the full article is here

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=4371](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4371)



excerpt: *in your community, what obligations are Jesus’ sermon calling us to embrace? What kind of relationality is Jesus exhorting in our midst today? The #metoo movement is critical in such reflections today as is the nurturing in community of those whose gender identity complicates previously assumed binaries. In short, Jesus here centers the construction of a particular kind of community, one organized around love and not power...It is also a community that centers on trust, a trust that does not rely on oaths but on the deep commitments*

*God’s children make to one another. In the end, to what are these commandments calling us? Not to a checklist of morality but to a flourishing of life. It’s not to a baseline of decency but to an embodied, relational, transformative encounter with all whom we meet.*

I hear him saying that this kind of “other centered” community is the goal - then and now. Jesus asked the disciples and asks us to embrace practices that make us one. This has far more power than any individualized moralizing about divorce, oaths, gender politics or issue du jour. Put away your stack of bibles and start acting like a blessing. With my focus today, our tongue and speech are a critical part of this path to wholeness.

**What to do?** Indian Manusmriti says: *Speak the truth, speak favorably, do not tell the truth that is not favorable. Also, do not tell untruth that is favorable - this is the eternal religion.* Paraphrase - don't lie, speak kindness. That's a pretty good start for moving away from swearing on a stack of bibles. We can build up trust through trustworthy acts. We can be strengthened by deliberate speech.

I share that obscure text because it has grown into our western imagination. The Manusmriti sprung into western thought in the 1950's and it's likely that Amy Carmichael, a missionary to India who was on her sickbed in the 1930's, was an earlier English reader of the text. Inspired by it, she wrote a paraphrase that we sometimes call the **three sieves**. *Many attribute these “three sieves” to Socrates or Buddha because it just sounds like something they would say - nope.* Here is what we now have:

*Before you speak, pass this test:*

**Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary?**

It's hard to practice and harder to remember in the heat of the moment. But it is positively one of the most effective trust building practices you can do with your mouth. So, how do you do it?

**Put some rocks in your mouth** - Not literally - because I don't want you to choke.

This exercise is for your words to have potency. Before the mechanics of the practice, let me share a story of one guy. Demosthenes, an Athenian from 2400 years ago, wanted to be a great orator but he had a speech impediment. According to legend he walked around with stones in his mouth to force himself to speak deliberately and with articulation. Most of us don't aspire to be great orators, but speaking with deliberation and intention is extremely important. This can even apply to those of you who barely speak only 50 words a day. Here is a fun article about Demosthenes' stones:



<https://itotd.com/articles/4074/demosthenes-stones/>

Next time you find yourself on the verge of being swept away by a political, gossipy, or critical conversation, remember: **STANKT**. **Stop** -- Touch the tip of your tongue to the back of your top teeth (or whatever physical cue works for you) -- **Ask** yourself: is what I am about to say -- **Necessary** -- **Kind** -- **True**? If not, hush your mouth. If yes, speak with conviction. Either way, see where the Holy Spirit leads. You probably won't remember the acronym. So, imagine one of my fellow southerners saying, “whoow lawd it STANKT in there!” (after smelling something particularly bad)



**Todd**