

Powerful Words

A Sermon on 1 John 4:7-21 and John 15:1-8 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ April 28, 2024

I joined the Episcopal Church about 30 years ago. One of the things I noticed was that Episcopalians use an extra set of words I had not heard before. Some of the special words we use are not especially important, such as nave, which is the name for the part of the building where the congregation sits. We call it 'the nave' because it is shaped like the upside-down hull of a naval vessel, a ship.

Sometimes our special words tell a more important story. Christians borrowed the word 'liturgy' from the Romans. In the 2nd and 3rd century, wealthy Roman citizens were expected to make large financial gifts to the city or town where they lived. These were given for the public good, and they came to be known with the Greek form of the word 'liturgy', which can mean 'public work'. Christians transformed the idea of liturgy from something that was done for the people, to something that was done by the people. Christians transformed 'liturgy' from referring to a large financial gift, to describe something much more valuable, the spiritual engagement of the congregation in the worship service. The idea of liturgy changed from works done for the people to work done by the people.

By the Middle Ages, the idea of liturgy as the work of the people had faded in significance. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries Christian worship was often in Latin. The problem with using Latin as the language for worship was that very few people could understand what was being said, because they did not speak Latin. So the idea of worship as liturgy, as the work of the people, was nearly lost.

In the 14th century reformers began the long task of returning Christian worship to the liturgical tradition of congregational engagement. One of the primary ideas of the Protestant reformation was that the words of worship should be in the common language of the people. In the 20th century, reformers continued this push for more engagement of the congregation in worship, through a series of reforms called The Liturgical Movement. Our 1979 Book of Common Prayer, with its emphasis on the sacraments of communion and baptism, and increased engagement of the congregation, is one of the results of The Liturgical Movement.

For Episcopalians today, 'liturgy' means 'work of the people', but the word communicates a much larger story. The most important idea about liturgy is the idea of engagement; there is a back and forth, interactive pattern of words and behavior between the leaders and the people. When some of us use the word 'liturgy' we are particularly concerned with the empowerment of all of the members in worship, and whether priests and bishops are attempting to accumulate or hold onto power.

Many people outside the Christian church, and some inside the church, don't understand what we mean when we talk about liturgy. It's likely that 1000 years from now, many people will have no idea of the rich collection of ideas we attach to the word 'liturgy'. We have a special vocabulary, one that carries powerful meanings for us.

We at St. Paul's also have some particular expressions that carry some extra meaning for us. For instance, if someone mentions Interstate-81 viaduct, decades of history and sadness come to mind for many of us. When I drive through the south side of Syracuse, and especially when I cross underneath the I-81 viaduct, I often think of the many people who lost their homes and businesses when I-81 was built in the 1960s. I think of the pattern we see repeated in almost every city in America; neighborhoods that were full of people, full of beauty and vitality were demolished in order to make way for the construction of Interstate highways through the cities. In many cases, the neighborhoods that were demolished were the neighborhoods where the black and brown or native people lived. So the expression, I-81 viaduct, holds some extra meaning for us.

A year or two back, I preached a sermon that was partly about the devastating effects of Interstate-81 for people of color in Syracuse. There is a good chance that if someone happens to come across a very dusty copy of that sermon in 100 years, they won't have much of an idea of what all of the fuss was about.

We have a special vocabulary, one that carries powerful meanings for us. In our specific locations, some particular expressions carry layers of meaning and history.

The Gospel of John and the letters of John also have a special vocabulary, and some expressions that carry extra meaning. For instance, the Gospel of John includes an unusual word: 'asynogogos'. In the original Greek text we find the term asynogogos, which means 'to be thrown out of the synagogue'. Asynogogos doesn't appear anywhere else in the New Testament.

The history behind asynogogos is that John's congregation was comprised of Jews who had been thrown out of the synagogues. About sixty years after the first Easter, John's people were pushed out of the synagogues by other Jews,

because of their adherence to Christian ideas and practices. The Gospel of John came into written form a few years later. Just to make this very clear: the people who first heard the Gospel of John were 100% Jewish, their parents and grandparents and other relatives were all Jews, and they were all followers of Christ. In the Gospel of John we see many places where the bitterness between the Christ following Jews and other Jews is front and center. There is a history behind this bitterness and division.

When we examine the special vocabulary, expressions, and content of John and 1 John we see other indications of the richness and power of the story that is being told. Several of these reinforce the idea that John's congregation was deeply rooted in their Jewish tradition. For instance, in the Gospel of John there are many references to Jewish liturgical festivals, such as Passover, the Festival of Tabernacles, and Hanukkah, also known as the Feast of Dedication.

In our passage from the Gospel of John Jesus said to his disciples, "I am the true vine." This is the fifteenth time in the Gospel of John that Jesus has used the expression: "I am". These "I am" statements of Jesus, refer back to a critical passage in the Jewish scriptures. In Exodus 3, Moses is talking directly with God, a remarkable event, and God gives Moses directions. After God has given the first set of directions, Moses says, "Hold on, just a second. Your people are not going to believe me when I tell them all this stuff. Who should I tell them sent me and gave me these directions." To which God replies, "Tell them 'I AM' gave you these directions and sent you." So whenever Jesus says "I am the bread of life" or "I am the light of the world" or "I am the good shepherd" or "I am the true vine", he is reaffirming his relationship with Yahweh, the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Jacob and Ruth, the God of Moses and Mary.

Much of the vocabulary and expressions of John come from the Jewish tradition. The same is true for 1 John. The ideas of 1 John unfold in the form of a spiral. This is a common practice in Jewish scriptures. In today's passage we read: Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. There are several themes that are braided together in the First Letter of John: God's love for us, our love for one another, the idea that we are children of God, and the closeness and unity of God and Christ and the Spirit. These themes are repeated over and over, with additional details braided in along the way, such as No one has ever seen God and perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment.

In 1 John the logic and the expressions unfold like a spiral or a braid. By contrast, Paul's letters are linear. In Paul's letters point A leads to point B, point C follows from A and B, and point D builds on all of the preceding ideas. Paul's linear logic comes from the Greek tradition. 1 John's spiral logic comes from the Jewish tradition. The spiral logic of 1 John is part of the special language of this congregation.

I'd like to point out one more part of John's special vocabulary that is extremely relevant and helpful for us. In the Gospel of John and the first letter of John the word 'abide' is used many times. There are only one or two uses of abide in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. John incorporates forty uses of abide. Eleven of those are found here in chapter fifteen. The first letter of John was probably written by a different member of this community, but the special vocabulary is the same.

In 1 John we read, God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. Remarkably, in 1 John, the author incorporates the word abide twenty-four times. There is a reason for this. The congregation that first heard the Gospel of John had been pushed out of the synagogues. The congregation that first heard the First Letter of John was hearing these verses five or ten years later. John's community of Christ followers was fracturing even more, under the strain of being pushed out of the synagogues, away from friends and family.

These leaders are phrasing the entire Gospel story with the language of abiding in Christ, because this is the urgent need of the members. They have lost their abode, or their dwelling place. They are, in a certain way, spiritually homeless. Some of them may have lost their literal, physical homes when they were pushed out of the synagogues. They will find salvation when they realize they are not spiritually homeless; they have a spiritual home that is located, not in any building, but in the love of God.

The same is true for you and for me. There are times in our lives when it feels like we are spiritually homeless, or at least that we are wandering. We are blessed to call this beautiful building our spiritual home. Even more, we are blessed to be part of a healthy, thriving community of God's people. Yet our spiritual dwelling place is not a place built by human hands. Our spiritual dwelling place is not limited by the strengths or weaknesses of the community that surrounds us. Our spiritual dwelling place is in the boundless, unfailing love of the one who created us out of love, and for the purposes of love.