
Girl Preachers, Juneteenth, and Letting our Lives Speak

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
The Third Sunday after Pentecost, and the Day before Juneteenth – Year A

I'm a person who likes to talk. Some of you know this about me already; others will learn it over time, much like Ruby Graham, my second grade teacher, did. Mrs. Graham, a Baptist minister's wife from Hot Coffee, Mississippi—yes, that's an actual place—Mrs. Graham, a Baptist minister's wife, was infamous for being a stern disciplinarian. She liked a quiet classroom and, in over forty years of teaching, she had developed some pretty reliable methods for maintaining one. Mrs. Graham worked diligently to keep her students quiet even on the way to recess and lunch. As we paraded through the hallways of W. I. Thames Elementary School, she would march alongside us, saying, "Shh! Shh! Shh! Shh! Shh!" right in time with our steps, as if we were some kind of bizarre drill team that had taken a vow of silence. Unfortunately, I had a propensity for breaking rank with my near constant chattering, resulting in numerous phone calls to my parents and no telling how many hours spent sitting in the corner. One day, in the middle of a phonics lesson, Mrs. Graham finally reached the limits of her patience with me. "Julia Boyd," she shrieked, her eyes blazing and finger wagging—"Julia Boyd, you talk so much that if girls were allowed to become preachers, I'll bet you could be one!"

And so here we are. I'll admit, preachers are a talkative bunch, though we're not the only ones. Historically, Christians as a whole have been pretty loquacious, arguably with good reason. In this morning's gospel lesson, Jesus seems to suggest, after all, that talking is a key component of discipleship. "As you go [around]," he instructs his first followers, "proclaim the good news." Tell the people that "the kingdom of heaven has come near." Tell. Talk. Proclaim. This might not seem like such an appealing proposition in a society like ours where, if statistics are to be believed, most people are becoming less and less receptive to the preaching of the gospel with every day that passes. And who can blame them? Too many of the words Christians have spoken through the years been hateful, hurtful ones. Others have simply been irrelevant and unnecessary. Still more have had the devastating effect of causing a kind of social and ethical paralysis, of suggesting that the main thing that matters about being a Christian is being able to say the right thing, of being able to spout off the correct set of beliefs. No wonder the criticism perhaps most often hurled at Christianity through the centuries has been that our faith is made up of too much talk and too little action.

I read an NPR story the other day about the Juneteenth holiday our nation will be observing tomorrow.^[1] This story sought to correct several commonly held myths about Juneteenth. One of these is that while Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, it somehow took two and a half years for news of this to reach slaves in Texas. This is simply not true. The reality is that many enslaved people in Texas did know what President Lincoln had done. They had gotten word of it fairly quickly. The news actually seems to have spread like wildfire, with some slaves becoming aware of the Emancipation Proclamation before the slave owners did. The problem was that even though slaves heard their liberation being talked about, in the words of one historian, "there was no one making it happen." There was no one enforcing it. People heard about what had taken place, but they did not see any signs of transformation. And so, the Emancipation Proclamation was, for the slaves in Galveston, Texas, just empty talk—it was empty talk until the arrival of two thousand Union soldiers on the 19th of June 1865 breathed life into it and made it real.

This is the thing about proclamation. This is the thing about the sort of proclamation Jesus is asking his followers to make in this morning's gospel reading. True proclamation is not just about reporting the news of the day in a disembodied, disinterested sort of way. It's not just about giving lip service to a message, it's about living that message with all our heart, all our mind, and all our strength, making that message incarnate so that the Word really does become Flesh and can dwell among us.

This is what makes Jesus' own speech, his own proclamation, so powerful: His words are transformational! They bring courage and hope where before there has been only fear and despair. Jesus' words, as the apostle Paul puts it, "call into existence the things that do not exist." They call into existence the things that do not exist. Jesus speaks, and improbable, crazy, life giving stuff happens. A beloved friend has been dead long enough so that his body has begun to stink. People are weeping and wailing and beating their breasts, all while a great murmur goes up: *If only Jesus had been here, this would never have happened!* But then Jesus is there and when he calls, "Lazarus, come out!", the dead man comes out. He says, "Unbind him and let him go," and a person who, only moments before, was on the verge of being six feet under, walks away free. This sort of thing happens over and over and over again throughout the gospels whenever Jesus opens his mouth. *Little girl, get up! Go in peace, your faith has made you well. Blessed are the poor. Blessed are those who weep. Do not be afraid. In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world.*

These words of Jesus are not empty talk. They are words that liberate and heal, words that, as a beloved prayer puts it, "let the whole world see and know that things which were being cast down are being raised up and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to their perfection by him through whom all things were made."^[2]

This morning's gospel reading challenges us as Jesus' followers to join him in this kind of transformational talk. It challenges us, in the words of an old Quaker adage, to "let our lives speak."^[3] To allow ourselves, through God's grace, to become that healing, liberating word for another human being, maybe even for an entire community of people—to allow ourselves to become that word that sets captives free, brings good news to the poor, and gives the blind their sight.

What might it look like for us here today if we committed ourselves to doing just this? Not just to speaking the word but to allowing ourselves to get swept up in that word, that living Word, that Word that "brings into existence the things that don't exist"? What might it look like? I don't know exactly, but I do know this: There are currently 25,000 hotel rooms here in Metro Atlanta—25,000—that are being lived in long term by our neighbors who are unhoused. Most of these rooms have only a microwave and a mini fridge for food preparation. In America, around nine million children struggle with hunger each year, and around 45 million children around the world suffer from severe malnutrition. Meanwhile, the kind of spiritual poverty that continues to take the lives of God's beloved children everyday through addiction and mental health crises—this spiritual poverty has reached a new threat level in the epidemic of loneliness that the Surgeon General of the United States recently declared a public health emergency.

Friends, I believe the Gospel of Jesus Christ has something to say to all of this, and it's not the word of judgement so often spoken to the poor and hurting by our world. It's not a word of judgment, it's a word of love. It's not a word on a page but the Word made Flesh, a Word living among us, full of grace and truth and hope and mercy and redemption and release. It's not a word that puts people to sleep in the middle of a sermon that's already gone on too long. No, it's a word that animates, that gives life to the dead, so that when we say, *Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen, indeed, alleluia!*—when we say these words, they leave the building with us to find a home in some of the darkest, most desperate corners of our world, where, in spite of what studies suggest, people still long to hear them. Amen.

^[1] "Four enduring myths about Juneteenth are not based on facts," www.npr.org, August 1, 2022.

^[2] Book of Common Prayer, page 291.

^[3] The original wording was apparently "Let your lives preach" and is attributed to letters written by George Fox in the late 17th century. Parker Palmer published a wonderful book on vocation in 1999 titled *Let Your Life Speak*.