The Word that Heals

Luke 7:1-10

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7 After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. **2** A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly and who was ill and close to death. **3** When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. **4** When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, "He is worthy to have you do this for him, **5** for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us." **6** And Jesus went with them, but when he was not far from the house, the centurion sent friends to say to him, "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; **7** therefore I did not presume to come to you. But only speak the word, and let my servant be healed. **8** For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me, and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it." **9** When Jesus heard this he was amazed at him, and, turning to the crowd following him, he said, "I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith." **10** When those who had been sent returned to the house, they found the slave in good health. (NRSVUE)

Introduction:

Many of you may already know this about me: I am fascinated by language. During my graduate studies, I spent years reading and thinking deeply about language, especially the philosophy of language. My interest went far beyond grammar or syntax. I was drawn to deeper questions: What is language? How does it work? What does it do to us? And perhaps most importantly, how do words shape the world we inhabit?

Why? Because language is not merely a tool for communication—it is the very foundation of human rationality. Without language, there is no reasoning. In fact, in Greek, the word *logos* means both "word" and "reason" or "logic." This is why we find it in disciplines such as biology, geology, theology, and anthropology. The two are inseparable. We reason through language. We think in words. Language gives structure to our thoughts and coherence to our world. It is no surprise, therefore, that aptitude tests or college admission tests like the ACT or GRE always include a strong emphasis on language.

Without language, there is no rational order. No meaning. No shared understanding. No moral argument. No political vision. No theology. No civilization.

But language is not just about the structure of thought or rationality. Since the late eighteenth century, especially with the rise of Romanticism, scholars, poets, and philosophers have also viewed language as the **outward expression of human feeling**. Language doesn't just construct

arguments—it carries desire, longing, beauty, and sorrow. You can see this especially in poetic language, which often stretches words beyond logic and into mystery.

The novelist **Virginia Woolf** captured this well when she wrote:

> "[Words] are the wildest, freest, most irresponsible, most unteachable of all things. Of course, you can catch them and sort them and place them in alphabetical order in dictionaries. But words do not live in dictionaries; they live in the mind."[1]

The beauty of Woolf's insight lies in her refusal to reduce words to mere definitions. While dictionaries try to *trap* words—pin them down, alphabetize them, tame them—Woolf reminds us that words don't really live there. They live in the **mind**, in the soul, in the **imagination**, in the **emotional life** of human beings. Words are alive. They move. They surprise. They resist control.

She describes them as "wild," "free," and "irresponsible"—because once spoken or written, words take on a life of their own. A sentence meant to comfort can wound. A phrase meant to wound can liberate. Words carry weight far beyond intention.

In 1975, however, the British philosopher **J.L. Austin** published a groundbreaking book titled *How to Do Things with Words*. In it, he challenged the traditional view of language as merely descriptive—a view that stretches back at least to Augustine. For centuries, language was seen primarily as a way to name what already exists.

But Austin argued that language doesn't just describe reality—it **does** something. Words have power not only to reflect reality but also to **perform** and even **create** it. This is what scholars call the "**performative** aspect" of language.

When a judge says, *"I now pronounce you guilty,"* something changes.
When a president declares, *"This nation is at war,"* the world shifts.

And when a pastor says, *"In conclusion,"* —you know there are at least **15 more minutes** to go.

These words don't merely inform; they **enact**.

When two people stand at the altar and the officiant says, *"I now pronounce you husband and wife,"* a new identity is formed by that **pronouncement**. Those words create a new social reality.

Whether we realize it or not, whether we like it or not, we live in a world made of words. Words define relationships. Words shape laws. Words make promises. Words create identities. And sometimes, a single word—spoken or written—can change everything.

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[1] https://www.speech.almeida.co.uk/words-fail-me

Words are not just sounds in the air or ink on paper. Words arrange our world. They authorize, exclude, define, condemn, permit, and belong. Our relationships, our institutions, even our destinies are shaped and reshaped by language.

We see the same **performative power of language** in history. During the bloodiest conflict in U.S. history—a civil war that would ultimately claim the lives of over 600,000 people—President Abraham Lincoln issued the **Emancipation Proclamation** on January 1, 1863. With that single declaration, he proclaimed that all enslaved people in the Confederate states *"shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free."*

The Proclamation did not immediately free every enslaved person—many remained in bondage until Union troops enforced it on the ground (June 19th celebration, 1865)—but the **speech act** mattered. A single political pronouncement began to reshape the legal and moral structure of the nation. It redefined the Civil War—not merely as a fight to preserve the union, but as a struggle for **freedom**. It gave enslaved people hope. It gave abolition a federal voice. And it laid the groundwork for the Thirteenth Amendment, passed in 1865.

Frederick Douglass, reflecting on the impact of that moment, wrote: "The scene was wild and grand. Joy and gladness exhausted all forms of expression, from shouts of praise to joys and tears."[2]

The words of the Emancipation Proclamation were not just printed on paper—they **unleashed a new world into being**.

Of course, the condition on the ground didn't immediately change everywhere.
But the *reality* had changed. A new world had been spoken into being.
The word itself carried a moral and political **force** that would ripple across generations.

Exposition of the Text:

In this text, we read a story about a Roman centurion—a man who, despite his position and status, felt unworthy to receive Jesus into his home. There's a great deal going on in this passage: cultural tension, questions of belonging, power dynamics between empire and occupied people. I won't unpack all those layers today. But what struck me deeply was the centurion's simple, yet profound plea to Jesus:

"Only speak the word (speak in a word), and let my servant be healed." (Luke 7:7)

The centurion isn't asking for Jesus' physical presence. He doesn't ask for a touch, or a ritual, or a dramatic act. What he asks for is the **word**.

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[2] Source: https://www.lincolncottage.org/black-reaction-to-the-emancipation-proclamation/

Why? Because he knows something that many of us often forget: that *words* are not passive. That words don't just report reality—they can **create** it. They can heal. They can transform. He believes that if Jesus speaks, the situation will change. That the utterance of Jesus' word will bring healing into being.

In the next verse, we see that this man—shaped by an imperial world of commands and decrees—**knows the power of a word**.

"For I also am a man set under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to one, 'Go,' and he goes, and to another, 'Come,' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this,' and the slave does it." (Luke 7:8)

He's not offering a lesson on military hierarchy. He's bearing witness to something deeper: that **words create reality**. In his world, when a command is spoken, something happens. Not later. Not metaphorically. But immediately and tangibly. A word doesn't just float in the air—it sets events into motion. Bodies move. Actions are taken. Realities shift.

However, he profoundly believes that this word from Jesus differs from the imperial order. It heals. It restores. It brings life.

In that one phrase—"Only speak the word"—the centurion bears witness to the mystery that when Jesus speaks, **reality bends toward healing**.

Application:

In our world today, words continue to shape reality, but far too often, they are used to exclude rather than to heal. Words are wielded like weapons, used to draw boundaries and determine who belongs and who does not. Entire communities are reduced to labels: "illegal," "threat," "alien," "criminal," "rapists," "abomination." In times of war, people have been called "vermin," "cockroaches," or "savages" to justify ethnic cleansing. During the Rwandan genocide in 1994, Tutsi people were repeatedly called *inyenzi* ("cockroaches,") *and as inzoka* ("snakes") in radio broadcasts to incite mass violence (Des Forges 1999, 65–66).

Under Nazi rule, Jews were depicted in propaganda as vermin, rats, parasites contaminating the German body politic (Herf 2006, 118–120). Enslaved Africans in the Americas were legally classified as "property" or "chattel," stripping them of legal personhood and framing them as commodities rather than human beings (Hartman 1997, 72–73).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, U.S. immigration debates referred to Chinese immigrants as a "yellow peril" to justify exclusionary laws (Ngai 2004, 37–38). In an article published by the *New York Tribune* on September 29, 1854, Chinese immigrants were described in openly dehumanizing terms: "They are uncivilized, unclean, and filthy beyond all conception, without any of the higher domestic or social relations; lustful and sensual in their dispositions; every female is a prostitute of the basest order; the first words of English that they learn are

terms of obscenity or profanity" (*Chinese Immigration to California*, *NY Tribune*, 29 Sept. 1854).

Such grotesque caricatures did more than racialize Chinese immigrants as inherently immoral; they weaponized sexuality to mark Chinese men and women as universally debased and threatening. Their very presence was equated with vice and moral decay, laying the groundwork for policies like the 1875 Page Act and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act that sought to preserve the racial and moral purity of the American nation by legislating exclusion.

These are not careless insults. They are performative words—terms that create social and political realities. They shape how policies are written, how borders are enforced, how violence is justified, how compassion is withheld.

These words do not merely describe—they deform. They destroy.
They do not just reflect social fears—they reproduce them.
They spread suspicion. They normalize cruelty.
They fracture our shared humanity.

Every time I think of the millions of people in this country who are labeled "illegal," I can't help but grieve. "They're eating cats and dogs." I grieve that our **words** have so often been used as weapons to destroy, to eliminate, to deport, to dehumanize. We know that there is no such thing as an "illegal" human being. At the most fundamental level, we are all created equal. So what makes the difference?

If you really think about it, the only thing separating an undocumented immigrant from a citizen is just **a piece of paper**. When I went through the naturalization process, I received one of those pieces of paper—a document called the **Certificate of Naturalization**. But the words on that page were not neutral. They carried power. They didn't merely describe who I was—they *declared* something about me. They named me a **citizen**.

And that naming changed everything—including the fact that now the **IRS will chase me until the day I die**. ☺

A single shift in language can mean the difference between **belonging and exile**, between **protection and fear**, between **dignity and disposability**. These are not just bureaucratic categories. They are **performative words**—language that acts, that constructs, that creates legal and social realities. Words that decide whether a person is seen or ignored, welcomed or expelled, protected or abandoned.

Because when Jesus speaks, the sick are healed.
When Jesus speaks, the excluded are brought in.
When Jesus speaks, the dead rise.
When Jesus speaks, reality bends toward mercy.

And what *does* Jesus speak?

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives,
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18–19)

That's what Jesus speaks.
Words of **good news**, not fear.
Words of **release**, not imprisonment.
Words that **open eyes**, not turn them away.
Words that **set free**, not shut out.
Words that **bless**, not curse.

Jesus' words are the words of liberation!

So the question is no longer just *what would Jesus do?*
The question is: **What will we speak?**

Let us pause and reflect this morning: How have we used our words? Toward your spouse, your children, your neighbor, your fellow humans?

> Have they been words that build up or words that tear down?
> Words that heal or words that wound?
> Words that welcome or words that exclude?

The same mouth that can bless can also curse, as James reminds us (James 3:9–10). Our words carry the power to shape the lives of those around us, for good or for ill.