

*A salt spring yields no fresh water*  
Christina Reimer, October 31, 2021

Proverbs 12:14-20  
James 3:1-12

Today is the second Sunday of Peace Month and I'd like to talk about the power of words to cause harm or make peace. I'll start by sharing a few moments from my life when my attitude towards "good words" and "bad words" was challenged.

After high school, I spent a number of months living in Belfast, Northern Ireland, also known as the North of Ireland or the British province of Ulster, depending on who you're talking to. I volunteered as a tutor for teens at a "cross cultural" community centre, which meant that it welcomed both Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants. I know! So diverse! As is so often the unfortunate case, political divisions in Northern Ireland were wrapped up in religious divisions – the Protestants being loyal to Britain and the Catholics fighting to leave Britain and join the Republic of Ireland to the south.

I lived with a group of international women, both Catholic and Protestant, who were all volunteers doing different kinds of peace work in the city. I was the youngest at 19 and an Irish nun named Kathleen was the oldest, in her mid-70s.

I had never really met a Catholic nun in person before, but I harboured many stereotypes about their modesty, piety, discipline and moral uprightness. Boy, was I shocked when sister Kathleen opened her mouth and a slew of Irish-accented swear words came pouring out. She wasn't an angry person, she just swore a lot.

Eventually I asked her how a nun, who is supposed to be holier than other people, could swear so much. She just laughed at me and said, "oh, you North American Christians are so puritanical. Lighten up, for F's sake." Sister Kathleen certainly challenged my ideas about good and bad language.

Swearing was *moderately* discouraged in the Reimer household growing up. Throwing out the "BS" word or even the rare "F" word would get at most a lukewarm rebuke from my parents. They weren't exactly strict about it. I remember my dad and his brothers speaking in Low German and laughing at what I knew were surely rude jokes. When I asked him to translate, dad said: "I can't say it in English, but don't worry, God doesn't understand Low German."

What *was* forbidden in our house was using a curse word as an insult towards someone in order to hurt them. This was quite an expansive category, including things like “shut up”, or “that’s stupid”. And we certainly weren’t allowed to take the Lord’s name in vain.

I had a lot of “secular” friends from public school and the phrase “Oh My God” was thrown around like it was no big deal. (This was, of course, before the “OMG” days.) I NEVER said this phrase, but when I heard my friends say it, it just sounded so satisfying! So perfect in the moment. And none of them even got struck by lightening! Not even once!

So, I decided that I was going to try it out.

One day in middle school, my mom told me that I had to wash dishes even though my friend Heidie was visiting. And it was then that I found my big moment. While I washed, Heidie regaled me with a juicy bit of gossip and I responded with a resounding “Oh. My. God.” Just as these blasphemous words came out of my mouth, the glass I was washing broke in my hand and my mom had to take me to the hospital to get 4 stitches. I still have the scar.

Some of you might know Allan Rudy-Froese. I got to know him as my pastor at Rockway Mennonite Church in Kitchener when I was in youth and I remember that the first time I met him, he said a swear word. Now, Allan teaches Preaching at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana and is currently working on a book about swearing and the church!

In an interview with the Winnipeg Free Press called “Saltier language in church? Some swear by it!”, Allan distinguishes between different types of swearing, such as: sacred swearing, where the name of God is taken in vain; swearing involving body parts, which is often sexual in nature or having to do with bodily refuse; and swearing that dehumanizes and degrades “the other”, for example misogynistic or racist words.

He also talks about how swearing can be cathartic and therapeutic, like when you stub your toe and a good swear just makes you feel better. He even points to studies that have shown that “profanity improves pain tolerance”.<sup>1</sup> I agree with Allan’s conclusion that Christians should lighten up about the occasional swear word. At least about the swearing that doesn’t hurt anyone.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/arts-and-life/life/faith/saltier-language-in-church-some-swear-by-it-575443332.html>

Words have tremendous power to harm and to heal. The Epistle of James tells us that “the tongue is a small member, but it boasts of great exploits.” Words are not just descriptors of reality. Words act. Words do things. Just think about how God brought the world into being: through the Word!

When I lived in Belfast, it was sometimes hard to understand the words people used. Even though people were speaking English, I had a hard time making everything out given the different accent and unfamiliar slang. And the Northern Irish have a habit of going up at the end of their sentences. So, I constantly thought that people were asking me questions. It was humbling to have to say “pardon” so often.

I mentioned the house I lived in earlier – it was one of a number of “reconciliation communities” in Northern Ireland, committed to building peace between Protestants and Catholics. We hosted all manner of community events, from youth gatherings to crocheting circles.

Our house was located right next to what is called a “peace wall” or a “peace line” that separated The Shankhill Road from The Falls – both fiercely political neighbourhoods. The peace wall was meant to protect these two factions from one another. Most of the peace walls in Belfast were built during a historical period of intense conflict called “The Troubles” which lasted for about 30 years until The Good Friday Agreement that was reached in 1998. What a beautiful name for a peace treaty.

The only political party that opposed this peace agreement was the Democratic Unionist Party led by Reverend Ian Paisley of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster.

I once heard Ian Paisley preach in the main square in Belfast. And he embodied what the book of James says: “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”

Paisley was a tall man, about 6’5”, with a booming evangelist’s voice and when I saw him speak, he was protected by an inner circle of elderly women softly singing hymns and then by an outer circle of unionist paramilitary men holding guns.

His sermon was a virulent attack on Catholicism, going so far as to call Pope John Paul II the “Anti-Christ”. Proverbs has something to say about such inflammatory language from the pulpit: “with the tongue we bless God and with it we curse those

made in God's image. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so." Proverbs also says that "a salt spring yields no fresh water". We cannot claim to love God while we curse God's beloved creatures at the same time. If we love God, we must love what God has made. And our words must reflect this holy consistency.

Paisley was one of the most influential voices of fundamentalist, political Protestantism during The Troubles and he stubbornly resisted the peace process for many years until it was forced upon him.

The influence of his words could even be felt by the youth in the community centre where I volunteered. One particular incident comes to mind.

A young man who I will call Stephen came to us via his school because he was not excelling academically and needed support. Stephen came from the Protestant Shankill Road neighbourhood and had never ventured outside of it until he joined our group. On his first day, we planned to go on a field trip to tour the various neighbourhoods of Belfast. He got on the bus and was visibly nervous. My co-worker Paul invited him to sit beside him and tried to make light conversation to calm him down. But he was distracted and kept anxiously looking around the bus. Paul asked him what was wrong and he whispered, "where are the Catholics?" And Paul answered: "there's a mix of Protestants and Catholics on the bus." And he whispered back, "but I don't see any." Paul asked him what he meant and he said, "I don't see anyone with horns." It sounds ridiculous, but he wasn't kidding.

Stephen had never left his all-Protestant neighbourhood and had been told by the adults in his life, and by people like Reverend Ian Paisley, that Catholics were demons. False teachers taught him that one could bless God while cursing one's neighbours.

The impact of words is earth-shaking. The book of James says, "how great a forest fire is set ablaze by a small fire. And the tongue is a fire." Luckily, Stephen stayed with us long enough that he formed some friendships with Catholic teens and unlearned some of the hatred that he'd heard his whole life until then. Stephen's story changed.

The impact of words is also world-forming. Through the Word God created us. Through words, we shape the realities of our children. And through words, we inspire new realities of peace and justice that douse the forest fires of hate. Words

act. Words do things. Proverbs teaches us that “rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”

And, so, to conclude, I want to turn to the healing power of words. Pádraig Ó Tuama is an Irish poet, a theologian and a conflict mediator. He is the host of *On Being*’s “Poetry Unbound” podcast, and used to be the leader of Corrymeela, Northern Ireland’s oldest peace and reconciliation organization. Ó Tuama once said that the goal of his organization is to make a space where people could “be in the same room with the people [they] talk about”.

He tells a great story about a time when he was doing peace work with young people in Northern Ireland. Through the course of this work, he got to know a teenage girl named Ashlynn who was particularly good footballer (soccer player to North Americans). At one of these meetings, Ashlynn got Ó Tuama’s attention and said, with a cheeky look in her eye, “Pádraig, can I ask you a question?” And he nodded. She proceeded to say, “God created us, right?” He nodded again. “And God loves us, right?” Nodded again. “Then why did he create Protestants?” A bit tongue-tied in the moment, Pádraig said: “Ashlynn, you’re going to have to tell me more about your question.” And she said, “Why did God create Protestants if they hate us and they hate him?” And he responded with, “I know plenty of Protestants who would love to have a great footballer like you on their team.” Ashlynn was surprised by his answer, smiled and said, “really?!”

What I love about this simple story is that Ó Tuama transformed a potentially inflammatory comment into a moment of kindness and curiosity. He knew that Belfast was speaking its painful story through Ashlynn’s words and he saw a chance to change the course of that story, just like Stephen’s experience at our community centre changed his story. Ó Tuama didn’t shut Ashlynn down by telling her “that is a terrible thing to say” or, “you’re wrong!”. Instead, he opened her mind to new possibilities beyond the stories she’d always been told in a way that did not shame her.

I’ll end with these words from Pádraig Ó Tuama:

“Kind [words] don’t cover over the past, [they do], however, propose something for *now* that might make the future different.”<sup>2</sup>

Let our words be kind and let our lips bless our neighbour as we bless God. Amen

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.corrymeela.org/cmsfiles/news/2018/11Nov/TFTD-for-R4.pdf>