"Whose Words Are These, Anyway?" reflections on Liturgy and Language

The Rev. Lev Sherman, St. John's Episcopal Church Bangor ME October 16, 2016

(Proper 24-C Pentecost 22: Genesis 32: 22-31, Ps 121, 2Tim 3:14-4:5, Luke 18: 1-8)

Our task this morning is language: we are here to talk about how we use it, why it is important, how we evaluate and value it. And specifically, we are taking this time to examine the issues of language and its impact in comparing the two versions of our service celebrating the Holy Eucharist: one with contemporary form and words; and the other following the tradition of our historical prayer book of 1928. But in order to set up this examination, I want to share with you some of my thoughts about language and its implications in a more general way.

One of my favorite stories from the annals of Maine humor concerns a family of tourists who stop at a gas station in Vassalboro. They drive up in a station wagon filled with shells, driftwood, wreaths and tipped branches, maple syrup, apples, and corn. On top of the car is tied a deer carcass and a large Christmas tree. As the store owner comes out, he gives a stunned look at the car as the driver gets out to ask him: "Mister, can I take this road to Portland??" The owner slowly pulls his eyes away from the car and looks at the driver:

"Well, I guess so…. **Looks like you've taken 'bout everything else**."

So some people can speak what they think is a clear statement, yet it can be heard very differently through another person's interpretation. I recently heard a remarkable presentation on the radio: Linguist John McWhorter was speaking about his new book, entitled "*Words on the Move: Why English Won't — and Can't — Sit Still."* McWhorter explores how the meaning of words change dramatically over time, and gives us some interesting perspectives on this process. "No one," he says "minds that today the clouds are neither in the same position nor in the same shapes they were yesterday. Yet more than a few mind that today the way people are talking is always changing.

Of course, if polled, few of us would put a check next to the statement "I think language should never change." However, so often we don't like it when the change actually happens. Somehow it seems that language is always changing in the wrong ways. It would seem that when most people express approval of language changing, they are thinking of something relatively **nondisruptive**: roughly, matters of keeping the language up to date. Certainly we will always need new words for new things. Historical transformations, especially, will change the language—it seems natural that our English is vastly different from the English of people seven hundred years ago living under a feudalist monarchy without electricity, photography, jazz, or penicillin. And most of us are okay with some

slang coming and going (in a sense of common use and acceptance). But beyond that, things get touchy. For instance, when it comes to people using literally to mean what would seem to be its opposite, that is, in a "figurative" way: ("I was itching so much I was literally about to die!"), or the word "like" with a frequency that makes it sound more like punctuation than a word; then the linguist may preach to the public that our language is dynamic, and "evolving" but to many, the better word would be degraded."

OK: so bear with me (no snoozing, please!) – all this analysis is to point out some interesting angles on our look at the languages of our prayer book. It is not only that the use and meanings of words change over time: but beyond simply noting, or reacting to the changes, looking more carefully at those uses and changes can DEEPEN our understanding and appreciation of the variety and change itself. One more example from Dr. McWhorter: "In Old English, the word pronounced **GAHST-litch** meant **"spiritual,"** but as sounds shuffled around or wore away and its very meaning drifted along, it became our modern English word **ghostly** — imagine that kind of thing happening to thousands of words bit by bit. The change would happen simply because mutability (variability) is as inherent to the very nature of language as it is for clouds to be ever in transformation."

One final bit about language and usage in a general way: I found it very interesting, and in some ways amusing, to see the extremes of reaction to the naming of this year's Nobel Prize in Literature, popular song-writer and poet Bob Dylan. It is the first time in the history of this much-coveted literary award that someone who is primarily a musician has won the prize. Dylan is also the first American to win the prize since novelist Toni Morrison in 1993. He is studied by Oxford dons and beloved by at least two US presidents.

Billy Collins, the former United States poet laureate, argued that Mr. Dylan deserved to be recognized not merely as a songwriter, but as a poet. "Most song lyrics don't really hold up without the music, and they aren't supposed to," Mr. Collins said in an interview. "Bob Dylan is in the 2 percent club of songwriters whose lyrics are interesting on the page even without the harmonica and the guitar and his very distinctive voice. I think he does qualify as poetry." It is also worth noting that, even for many who have followed and admired his writing and singing, many of his lyrics might as well be considered as in a foreign language in their elusive meaning !

II.> So where does all this leave us in what I stated as our task for this time? Language is mutable. Meanings change (for many different reasons); uses change. And we might well continue with the question: IS there any value in

preserving and continuing to use old, and in some cases, incomprehensible language in our prayer book and services? I think that our discussion and better understanding of the services will lead us to answer this question in a most positive way. It is not so much to gain great enlightenment by seeing why (in our more "modern" liturgy) we have changed all references to "the Holy Ghost" into "the Holy Spirit (aha); it is much more to look at some of the detailed language and find what it really holds as a spiritual expression, and as creating powerful IMPACTS through certain usages, which are well-worth preserving.

In a session after the ten-oclock service today, I hope we can open up this discussion even more: and that we can all share thoughts and responses to these issues of liturgy and language. We will have other opportunities later to look at different parts and details of the services. And of how some parts have changed and some have not. But what I would most like to leave you with in this sermon time is the one dominant issue to which this examination has led me: there is much richness in the beautiful expressions, and in both the poetic and biblical foundations, of our liturgy. In both versions of the Eucharist in our Prayer Book, and in many of the alternative forms which have been and will be developed, there is a deepness which goes far beyond our "regular" language. I encourage you to go back (or to get it for the first time if you have not already read it) to the introduction written by Bruce Mallonee, with his three parts of reflection on this whole subject. SHOULD we preserve and continue to seek and teach understanding of the language of Shakespeare? (I'd love to know how high-school and college teachers approach teaching Shakespeare with the evolving language of our time). Should we continue to look at the history, origins, and language of the works of Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer, who wrote much of our existing prayer book in 1549? If our answer to these questions is no, we can be sure we will lose a vast store of spiritual strength and unity. To back this up, I can only share with you the sense of spiritual connection I find in some of the language which links me to all my years in the 1928 prayer book (including my fist six years of ordained ministry).

III > Consider, and just listen, absorb if you can, these expressions:

> ALMIGHTY and everliving God, who by thy holy Apostle halt taught us to make prayers, and supplications, and to give thanks for all; We humbly beseech thee most mercifully to accept our oblations, and to receive these our prayers, which we offer unto thy Divine Majesty; beseeching thee to inspire continually the Universal Church with the spirit of truth, unity, and concord: And grant that all those who do

confess thy holy Name may agree in the truth of thy holy Word, and live in unity and godly love.

Father of all mercies, we thine unworthy servants do give thee most humble and hearty thanks for all thy goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all. We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ; for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And, we beseech thee, give us that due sense of all thy mercies, that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful; and that we show forth thy praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up our selves to thy service, and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days.

We earnestly desire thy fatherly goodness, mercifully to accept this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving; most humbly beseeching thee to grant that, by the merits and death of thy Son Jesus Christ, and through faith in his blood, we, and all thy whole Church, may obtain remission of our sins, and all other benefits of his passion. And here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee; humbly beseeching thee, that we, and all others who shall be partakers of this Holy Communion, may worthily receive the most precious Body and Blood of thy Son Jesus Christ, be filled with thy grace and heavenly benediction, and made one body with him, that he may dwell in us, and we in him.

To me these and many such expressions are much more than words or language; they are a deep expression of my own spiritual being. This must be what Archbishop Cranmer felt in creating the first liturgy of the English-speaking church. It is a language born of respect, of wonder, of deep conviction. It is the result of the struggle to express the most profound of relationships in our own language for the first time. It is part of our heritage, yes; but it is also part of our truth. We would do well to hold it dear, as well as to study its meaning. Hold us O Lord in the abundance of your mercy, and lead us into the world in the magnitude of your Spirit. In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.