Sticks and stones will break my bones but: ___(words will never hurt me)_____.

Right.   Right?

How many have ever felt hurt by something someone said? How many have ever hurt someone with their words?

And have you ever had one of those conversations in which you say something, and the other person lets you know they feel offended by it. In your mind, they took it wrong. So you try to explain. But then they get mad that you aren't listening to them. And then you're like why are you so quick to get mad at me? And they get madder and say you are trying to turn the conversation on them. And then you say that you're afraid to say anything now because they'll freak out. And they say you're the one freaking out, they're just speaking their truth?

Anyone ever have a conversation like that? Or maybe you were on the other side of it. I've experienced both sides for sure. It's rough on both ends.

When people describe being exasperated about political correctness, that's what it reminds me of—at least, in some cases it does. Apparently lots of people are exasperated.

Last December, NPR ran a headline that said, "Warning To Democrats: Most Americans Against U.S. Getting More Politically Correct."[i] The story was about a poll that had been done, involving 1,075 adults. Based on the poll, the story extrapolated that fifty-two percent of Americans are against the country getting more politically correct. Here are a few numbers from the study:

Breaking it down by party, 78% of Republicans and 33% of Democrats were against getting more politically correct.

Looking at it another way, 14% of Republicans and 55% of Democrats were in favor of *more* political correctness. Among independents, it was 53% against, and 33% for more political correctness.

Breaking it down by gender, at 52% in favor, women were almost twice as likely as men to want more political correctness (or PC). And by race, the majority of people identifying as Whites and Latinos were against the US becoming more PC (52% and 56% against), while the majority of those identifying as African American (52%) were for it.

Obviously, this story generated a stir. I found it interesting that there was no option for "we have the right amount of political correctness right now".

I also noticed that the story never defined what "politically correct" means. I looked up the original poll data and it didn't define it either, although the way they phrased the question they asked people does contain some context clues. The question asked was (quote), "In general, are you in favor of the United States becoming more politically correct and like when people are being more sensitive in their comments about others or are you against the country becoming more politically correct and upset that there are too many things people can't say anymore?[ii]

According to those context clues, political correctness is either being sensitive in one's comments about others, or it is feeling that you are not allowed to say certain things. Those are two really different definitions. Being sensitive, or being disallowed.

So, in this month when our theological theme is Truth, we're going to parse political correctness a little bit this morning. It's a concept that has to do with our relationships with each other, which is important to UUs. Whatever our diverse individual theologies might be, this church is very much grounded in humanism, which in its classical sense that we place prime importance on human rather than supernatural matters. Human relations, liberation and freedom, wellbeing, and fairness are important to us.

Throughout this sermon, I'm going to talk some about history and trends among political liberals and conservatives when it comes to the issue of being PC. Let us remember that these groups are not monoliths, nor is this congregation. On the individual level, there is a lot of variety in people's perspectives. And as the poll shows, the controversy is not cleanly divided along political lines. I'll talk more about that, too.

In practice, no one refers to *themselves* as politically correct. Although I try to be sensitive to others in my comments, I would not express that by saying, "I try to be politically correct." The term has a mocking or sarcastic connotation. And that's not new.

Back in the 1960's and 70's, liberal leftists used the term amongst themselves, but they did so in an ironic way. It was something one leftist would call another in order to say, *hey, you're getting a little dogmatic there*.[iii] All the way until the late 80's, it was still almost always liberals who used the term, and they still typically used it against fellow liberals becoming excessively orthodox.

According to journalist Moira Weigel, "some of the first people to organize against 'political correctness' were a group of feminists who called themselves the Lesbian Sex Mafia. In 1982, they held a 'Speakout on Politically Incorrect Sex' in New York… a rally against fellow feminists who had condemned pornography and BDSM."

Meanwhile, an increasingly organized contingent from the conservative right had been pushing back hard against the changes all those leftists, liberals, and feminists—and LGBT and anti-racism activists—had ushered in.

They were particularly galled by the move in liberal arts colleges away from a curriculum that centered on traditional Western thought—all those classics of philosophy, literature, and politics that have shaped American culture—and were almost exclusively written by white men. Now there were departments of women's, and Africana, and lesbian and gay studies. The classics could no longer be taken for granted as the core curriculum. Now students and professors were expected to engage other perspectives and disciplines. To "put them in conversation with" each other, as my seminary professors would say. This was really upsetting to those who disagreed with the inclusion of those new perspectives, in particular because as academia integrated them, it became less and less acceptable for scholars to challenge their basic validity.

In 1990, Richard Bernstein published an article in the New York Times called "The Rising Hegemony of the Politically Correct." Hegemony is a word that comes from those new departments. It means the cultural dominance of one group over others. So using it as the headline was kind of an "in your face" move.

The article complained that long-time accepted truths were suddenly being questioned in universities. Now, everything was being critiqued through the lenses of power and culture, including the very idea that there are timeless, universal truths we can all point to. And certain topics now seemed off limits. Homosexuality was no longer up for debate in academia. It had been accepted as valid. A progressive perspective on environmentalism, affirmative action, and other issues was assumed as well. "Politically correct," Bernstein wrote, was a term to describe "a growing intolerance, a closing of debate, a pressure to conform to a radical program or risk being accused of a commonly reiterated trio of thought crimes: sexism, racism and homophobia."[iv]

Here I want to interject two things. First, it is right for more diverse perspectives to be integrated into education. And there was and is a lot of sexism, racism, and homophobia to weed out, and most people do not like to be told when their words or behavior is sexist, racist, or homophobic. (See the sermon from October called "Learning to Be White."[v])

At the same time, it's tricky for outsiders to critically engage perspectives that have become matters of justice, especially when the outsider is a ham-handed young college student from a privileged demographic group. But critical thinking and engagement is what is supposed to happen at universities. This catch 22 is one of the core arguments from the anti-PC camp.

Bernstein's article launched the concept of political correctness into mainstream consciousness. Before 1990, political correctness was rarely mentioned in newspapers

and magazines. The year of Bernstein's article, it was mentioned 700 times. The next year, 2500 times. In 1992, 2800 times.[vi] The political right picked up the idea, and used it to make the political left –associated with those academic trends and prismatic definitions of reality—look disconnected from the lives of blue-collar people, especially in rural areas.

Political correctness was a hot topic for the next decade. After 9-11, it died down for several years while the American public's attention turned to terrorism, national security, and war. But, Moira Weigel writes, as the Black Lives Matters movement and movements against sexual violence gained momentum, "a spate of thinkpieces attacked the participants in these movements, criticising and trivialising them by saying that they were obsessed with policing speech."

In January 2015, New York magazine published one of the first new widely-read anti-PC essays. It was called "Not a Very PC Thing to Say." Written by a liberal named Jonathan Chait, the essay spoke of controversial speakers being banned or disinvited from college campuses, again often around issues of sexism, racism, and homophobia. He described political correctness as an enemy to liberalism. He cited a feminist Facebook group in which some members told others they were being racist. Describing their responses as "rage," he included several quotes that, frankly, just sounded like pointed discussion.

He concludes the article by saying, "Politics in a democracy is still based on getting people to agree with you, not making them afraid to disagree…The historical record of American liberalism, which has extended social freedoms to blacks, Jews, gays, and women, is glorious. And that glory rests in its confidence in the ultimate power of reason, not coercion, to triumph."

The thing is, he—and a lot of the American public—are misremembering the history of progress. Polite conversation has never been enough to inspire the powerful to grant rights to those without power. Picture civil rights activists being dragged from a lunch counter. The March on Selma. It was like that. Persistent. Insistent. Uncomfortable.

Of course, certain other anti-PC figures have made it explicit that they are not interested in respectful conversations.

During one of the presidential campaign debates, moderator Megyn Kelly asked Donald Trump some pointed questions about the way he speaks about women. She said, "You've called women you don't like 'fat pigs,' 'dogs,' 'slobs,' and 'disgusting animals.' … You once told a contestant on Celebrity Apprentice [something I'm not going to repeat in a sermon]."[vii]

Trump replied, "I think the big problem this country has is being politically correct… … I don't frankly have time for total political correctness."

That's very different than the frustration of people who don't intend offense and get flustered or offended when something they say ends up being offensive in its impact.

I'm pretty sure if that political correctness poll had used those words as an example, the results would have been different. "Do you favor the country becoming more politically correct, so, for example, people don't call women fat pigs, dogs, slobs, and disgusting animals? Or are you against the country becoming more politically correct, and you prefer that people *do* say those things to women?"

The way we frame things is important. Whether it's polling questions, or perspectives that are included in college curriculums, movie making, publications, and more.

Last week, a story published in our denomination's magazine, UU World, demonstrated this in a painfully clear way.[viii] The editors had decided to do a story called "After L, G, and B" about what they described as the "increasing visibility" of trans people. The headline said: "Listening to transgender and non-binary people is about respect, relationship, and whether we can be a truly inclusive faith." It was written by one of the contributing editors for the magazine, a cis-gender woman (meaning a woman who is not transgender). The author used her personal struggle with understanding and accepting transgender as the main story for the article, with some statistics and explanations woven in.

As the editors researched the piece, they reached out to a transgender UU leader, Alex **Kap**itan. Alex repeatedly urged them *not* to do the piece, explaining that a cis gender person writing *about* trans UUs, when there are so many trans UUs who could speak with their own voices in the article instead, would be harmful. Transgender Religious Professionals in our denomination (TRUUST) had just published a study showing that transgender people often experience rejection in UU congregations, whether through hostile 1:1 interactions or more subtle expressions of unwelcome, and had issued a call to action.[ix] This article—one of the first major pieces UU World has ever published about transgender—would once again sideline transgender voices, and make a cis-gender viewpoint the main viewpoint.

Alex said,

> *Imagine wanting to do a story about Black Lives Matter that was written by a white person and was all about the "increasing visibility" of black people and the discomfort that white people have with Black Lives Matter banners, black people's needs within UU churches, and the concept of Black Lives Matter as a movement. I know that the intentions are good, but this kind of approach will unquestionably cause harm.[x]*

Alex also offered a list of names of trans UU writers who could help create a better piece.

Well, the editors decided to proceed as planned, and even though they quoted Alex at length, they did not let Alex see the final draft before it went to press.

The article contained factual errors about trans people and trans history and went on tangents about the medical side rather than focusing on the spiritual or human side as you would expect a religious publication to do. It casually included an offensive slur. It described painfully awkward encounters between the author and trans people. The overall tone was not about being welcoming, but about the comfort of cis-gender people.

There was an immediate backlash of sadness, anger, and disappointment from transgender and other UUs. The magazine's editor promptly issued a heartfelt apology. I have not seen a response from the author yet.

As they wrote an article with a headline that said, "Listening to transgender and non-binary people is about respect, relationship, and whether we can be a truly inclusive faith," they totally failed to listen and include.

The way we frame things is important. Perspective is important. That is what has always been at the root of what came to be known as political correctness. It was about taking seriously different perspectives. Even if, in practice, it is not always perfectly executed.

And the words we choose are important. As I tried to track down a definition of political correctness, I came across the Harvard Political Review magazine, which tried to trace PC controversy to essential characteristics of liberalism and conservatism. The article said:

> Conservatism, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is a tendency or disposition "to maintain existing views, conditions, or institutions," including, but not limited to the American vernacular. Conversely, liberalism is a "belief in the value of social and political change in order to achieve progress." It therefore makes sense that those with liberal ideologies continue to institute new rules of language and speech.[xi]

Well, I don't know. I've known liberal minded people who did not want to be flexible with words—especially religious words they might hear in a religiously liberal church!

I find it curious to think that people of any persuasion might insist on words never changing. Words change all the time. You don't hear of big controversies over changing from thee and thou to "you." I don't think many people minded going from schoolmarm to teacher, or from horseless carriage to car.

So why the resistance when it comes to the words of representation, identity, and perspective? Like saying women instead of girls. Language is, after all, fundamental to our humanness. Without words, we would not have meaning or even a sense of self. If you did not know the word, "I", or any other word, how would you form any concept of self? You would just be a bundle of reactions to stimuli.

It matters what we have the words and perspective to say, because that's the difference between what we can conceptualize and what we cannot conceptualize. In that way, it is the difference between a fully human existence, and a kind of non-existence. Our words, our language, and our perspectives, are always incomplete and in formation. I'm going to close with a reading from The Magnificent Defeat, by Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner. He writes,

> We are cursed with language, of course, paralyzed with words, and that is part of the trouble. Somebody points to the window and says, "What's that?" And I look to where [they are] pointing and I say, "Why that's the sky. It's just the sky." I give it a name. I label it. I reduce it to a word that vaguely suggests all the characteristics that it has in common with other skies at other times but leaves out all that is unique about it. And in so doing I dismiss it. I have failed to see what is really there outside my window and have seen only my conception of it, my word for it. "Sky" is only a sound I make with my mouth, after all, a mark I scratch on paper. What is really up there, up above me now, is not sky. There is no such thing as sky. It is *that.* It is those fathoms and fathoms of deep of whatever it is, without name or substance or form. A pair of wings hover in the emptiness of it. It swarms with light, the stuff and mystery of the universe. "What is that?" I answer, "Why, it is the sky."[xii]

May we be curious about the mystery of each other, and inclusive. May we strike the right balance of kindness and persistence, openness and memory. May we speak the truth in love, as best we know it. And may we continue to learn and grow.

[i] https://www.npr.org/677346260
[ii] http://maristpoll.marist.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/NPR_PBS-NewsHour_Marist-Poll_USA-NOS-and-Tables_Civility_1812051719.pdf#page=3
[iii] https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/nov/30/political-correctness-how-the-right-invented-phantom-enemy-donald-trump
[iv] https://www.nytimes.com/1990/10/28/weekinreview/ideas-trends-the-rising-hegemony-of-the-politically-correct.html?pagewanted=all
[v] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vnc5YaXW03g
[vi] From ProQuest, ctd. in Weigel.
[vii] Ctd. in Weigel.
[viii] https://www.uuworld.org/articles/apology-spring-2019
[ix] https://transuu.org/truust-report/
[x] https://rootsgrowthetree.com/2019/03/06/what-it-takes-to-de-center-privilege/
[xi] http://harvardpolitics.com/united-states/phrase-flux-history-political-correctness/

[xii] HarperSanFrancisco: 1966. (139)