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From the Publisher

Mark Wilhelm

Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities

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From the Publisher



I write this column with the famous (in Christian circles) words about the human tongue from the Letter of James in the New Testament freshly on my mind. The text was one of readings yesterday at my church. The passage from James reads, “How great a forest is set ablaze by a small

fire. And the tongue is a fire! No one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison” (James 3:5b-6a; 8). As James writes more succinctly earlier in his letter, “If any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues... their religion is worthless” (1:26).

Social ethics is not my academic discipline. Nonetheless, I can safely say that much Christian discourse about ethical conduct turns around the interplay of “bridling the tongue” and at the same time endorsing frank, honest conversation. The latter concern finds expression in a passage in the Letter to the Colossians, which urges Christians to always let their speech “be seasoned with salt” (4:6). Christians are to embrace a love ethic, but they are not to be door mats for Jesus, nor are they to ignore the evils they see. As the Lutheran tradition puts it, a theologian of the cross (that is, a follower of Jesus), calls a thing what it is.

Balancing the need for frank honesty in our speech, while at the same time not permitting frank speech to degenerate into hateful speech, is a daunting challenge. It is no virtue to avoid challenging difficult issues or wrongful acts under the banner of maintaining civility. At the same time, it is no virtue to speak with an arrogant, haranguing, unbridled tongue. We struggle to find the sweet spot. In response to the evil of segregation in the United States, Martin Luther King was convinced that nonviolent action was the way to “speak” frankly and honestly, controlling and avoiding

“speaking” hate through a violent response. Malcolm X thought otherwise. The debates continue.

The challenge is further complicated because evil in our speech is easily disguised. This can be true in personal speech, for example, when overtly mild speech is used to demean someone, as in the damning of African Americans with faint praise in the comment “he speaks so well,” while omitting the implied “for a (n-word).” Evil social or organizational speech may also be disguised, often perniciously. For example, overtly “good” public speech by organizations is increasingly used for evil through the mechanism known as astroturfing. Astroturfing is the practice of hiding the true sponsors of a message to make a message appear to be from some other (typically, grassroots) group. See John Oliver’s September 16 episode of *Last Week Tonight* on HBO if you are unfamiliar with the dastardly practice of astroturfing.

In higher education, the received practices of the academy give us an advantage over many groups in the United States for facing the challenge to sustain frank and honest but not hateful discourse about complex and divisive public issues. We should insist that the standards of academic discourse prevail when such issues are taken up on our campuses. These standards do not allow any and all speech, as guidelines adopted by many NECU institutions demonstrate. The standards of the North Atlantic academy, in which NECU institutions share, are deeply rooted in the Lutheran tradition and its insistence on frankness, honesty, and calling a thing what it is, while maintaining a concern for others and the common good and avoiding acrimony amid divisive disputes. The standards of academic discourse do not eliminate the challenge of speaking appropriately, but they give all of us in ELCA-related higher education a solid platform on which to stand. And they do this within a larger, fragmented culture struggling for pathways into civil discourse.

Mark Wilhelm is the Executive Director of the Network of ELCA Colleges and Universities.