

“The Healing Power of Words”

Rev. Paul Jensen

Exodus 17:1-7 and John 4:1-15

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Words can hurt! That’s what the Rev. Tom Quigley wrote after he participated in a Church Advocacy Day in Olympia. Clergy, lay persons, and religious leaders came together to speak with state and legislative people about issues of compassion and justice. Of all the words spoken and heard that day, Tom Quigley remembers most those of a member of the State House of Representatives, a young woman, who met with a group of bishops and denominational leaders over lunch. Her words were a cry for help and an expression of deep hurt.

She told the group that she had grown up in the Church and that she and her husband had joined the Presbyterian Church in their neighborhood, committed to raising their children as part of a community of faith. It was partly out of her faith commitments that she had decided to run for public office. But after being elected and coming to Olympia, she told the group, The first thing I heard from those claiming to be a part of the Christian community was that I was un-Christian because of my position on several issues.

WORDS! Words can be used to hurt, to deceive, and to distort. People can hide behind words. When a politician gives a speech, what do we often say: Promises, empty promises! When the appliance repair shop says, “We’ll be there to fix your refrigerator tomorrow at 2 o’clock. You can count on it.” Well believe that when we see it! When a president speaks boldly of building a new world order or assures us I’ll never lie to you or says soothingly I feel your pain, we raise a skeptical eyebrow.

At the dawn of creation, words were given as a gift from God. Animals make sounds, but human beings form words, potentially full of meaning and truth. Whatever else we lost in the Garden of Eden, we lost the trustworthiness of language. Men and women became afraid, and because they became afraid, they began to hide – from God and from each other – behind fig leaves and behind lying words:

“Where is your brother?”

“I don’t know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen. 4:9)

Now, all of this should give us some concern, since the things that were called to do as Christians is done basically with words: prayer words, worship words, sermon words, words of hope, words of protest, words of praise. Where there is grief, words of comfort. Where there is injustice, prophetic words. Where there is complacency, challenging words. Words, words, words!

My wife and I have been painting the outside of our house the past three weeks. We’re looking forward to using one of our favorite four-letter words soon: DONE! There are a number of wonderful four-letter words, like love, hope, work, care, kind, help, and give!

The words that we speak can be filled with grace and truth. That’s part of what our Gospel story of Jesus and the woman at the well is all about.

What did Jesus really do for this woman? He didn’t heal her of any disease; he didn’t raise her child from the dead; he didn’t dazzle her by turning the water into wine. He simply talked with her, that’s all! WORDS! But the words he spoke were so radically different from the other words she had heard, that she was never the same again after that day.

It's important to note that this story doesn't begin with words. It begins in silence. Not gentle, tranquil silence, but hard, cold silence! Why? Because the main characters were a Samaritan woman and a Jewish man. Between them was a wall of silence, built brick by brick with prejudice and hatred, through which no word was allowed to pass.

"Would you give me a drink of water?" asked the Jewish man to the Samaritan woman, and the wall came tumbling down! One seemingly ordinary phrase, a quiet word that cut against the grain of the culture, and the wall came tumbling down.

A minister tells about a young woman who was a member of a congregation he served. After college, she had entered pharmacy school, but from time to time she came home and worshiped with her parents. One Sunday evening, after one of her visits, the minister received a phone call from her father. The father, somewhat upset, reported that his daughter had just called with the news that she had suddenly decided to drop out of pharmacy school. When the minister asked what could possibly have led to such a decision, the father confessed that he had no idea and asked the minister to call his daughter and talk some sense into her.

When the minister called the young woman, he expressed shock that she would decide to forfeit all of her hard work and that she should think long and hard before throwing it away. "How in the world did you come to this decision?" he asked her.

"It was your sermon yesterday that started me thinking," she replied. She went on to describe the theme of the sermon, that God calls everyone to a ministry, that God has some service for every Christian to do. She said that she realized that she was in pharmacy school for selfish reasons, to enter a lucrative career rather than to serve God. She had remembered a wonderful summer spent working as a part of a church program teaching reading to the children of migrant workers and how much she had felt that she was truly serving God then. So, after hearing the sermon that morning, she had decided to dedicate her life to working with underprivileged children.

There was a long silence on the minister's end of the line. "Now look," he finally said, "I was just preaching!" Words, sermon words, words of the call of God ... and the wall came tumbling down!

When the wall fell down between Jesus and the woman at the well, she seemed startled -- perhaps even frightened. There's something comforting about a wall. It may hem us in, but at least we don't have to face what's on the other side of it. So, in shocked disbelief that the wall has fallen, perhaps even trying to rebuild the wall as a hiding place, the woman fired a flurry of words at Jesus. But beneath the words, Jesus heard the real person:

"Why is it that you, a Jew, ask for water from me, a Samaritan woman?" she asks.

"If you knew the gift of God," he replies, "you could have asked, and he would have given living water."

"Who do you think you are? You haven't even got a bucket. Even Jacob had to have a bucket. Are you greater than Jacob?"

Hearing her need, Jesus makes an offer: "Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but those who drink of the water I give will never be thirsty."

It was then that the woman said the fatal word, the word that caused the death of her old self, and gave her

new life: "Give me this water that I may never be thirsty."

Following graduation from seminary, a woman became the pastor of a small church, small enough so that she set for herself the goal of visiting every family on the church roll in the first six months. At the end of six months, she had almost done it. She had visited every family, but one! People said about that last family, "They haven't been here in two years. Don't bother; they aren't coming back!"

The new pastor had set her goal and she was determined to reach it. So one afternoon she drove out to the house. Only the wife was at home; she poured cups of coffee and they sat at the kitchen table and chatted. They talked about this, and they talked about that. Then they talked about **IT**. Two-and-a-half years earlier she had been at home with their young son. She was vacuuming in the back bedroom, had not checked on him in a while, so she snapped off the vacuum, went into the den and didn't find him. So she followed his trail, across the den, through the patio door, across the patio, to the swimming pool, where she found him. She told the pastor, "At the funeral, our friends at the church were very kind. They told us it was God's will."

The minister put her cup down on the table. Should she touch **IT**, or should she not? She touched **IT**!

"Your friends meant well, I am sure, but they were wrong."

"What do you mean?" the woman asked.

"I mean that God does not will the death of children."

The woman's face reddened, and her jaw set. "Then whom do you blame? I guess you blame ME."

"No, I don't blame you. I don't want to blame God, either."

"Then how do you explain it?" she said, her anger rising.

"I don't know. I can't explain it. I don't understand why such things happen, either. I only know that God's heart broke when yours did."

The woman had her arms crossed, and it was clear that this conversation was over. The minister left the house kicking herself: Why didn't I leave it alone? A few days later the phone rang. It was the woman she had visited, "We don't know where this is going, but would you please come out and talk with my husband and me? We've assumed that GOD was angry at US; maybe it's the other way around."

With a redemptive word, we can touch the real issues in people's lives and connect them with God.

Because God became human flesh and continues to abide with us by his Spirit, our words can make a difference for others. When we stare our fear right in the face, and we venture out in faith into the tempest of confusion and hurt, and we try to find some way – any way – to say the gracious word to people in need, the promise we can trust is this: By the mercy of God, our frail words can become the earthen vessels for the living Word so desperately needed, the Word that is Christ Jesus who came to bring us all new life.