

The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost
Pastor Michael Archer

8-13-06

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but (congregation in unison adds) words will never harm me.”

That is the biggest crock I have ever heard. I know there are people who live by it, who believe it... but it is a crock. Words *do* have an impact. Words can hurt us as well as build us up. It is very clear throughout Scripture that in God’s heart and mind words matter.

In the reading for this morning from Deuteronomy, we find the very familiar phrase, “*One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.*” In the creation story from Genesis, God *spoke* the world into existence. John’s Gospel begins by saying “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The word became flesh and dwelt among us.*” Words from God are life.

Psalm 34, the Psalm appointed for today, begins, “*I will bless the Lord at all times. His praise will ever be in my mouth. Proclaim with me the greatness of the Lord. Let us exalt his name together.*” Not only are the words that come from God important, but we are also to be attentive to the words that come from our lips.

Today’s reading from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians includes, “*Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.*” Do you see one of the common threads in these readings? From God to us, from us to God, and from us to one another... words matter.

It is important that the words we use are uplifting. That the words we use are to build people up and not to tear them down. In the Gospel for today Jesus responds to the Pharisees that have come to him, complaining. “*Do not complain amongst yourselves,*” he says. Jesus was very attentive to words. It is also very clear in the Gospel that Jesus understood the power of the word, the spoken word. He used the spoken word to advance the purpose for which he was sent into the world.

At the end of what is known as the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew records, “*The crowds were amazed at his teaching because he taught as one who had authority and not as their teachers of the law.*” Words that people had heard many times before suddenly came to life and connected with them because they were presented by someone with the authority of God.

In Matthew chapter 12, Jesus says to the gathered crowd, “*out of the overflow of the heart, the mouth speaks. But I tell you on the Day of Judgment, men will have to give account for every careless word they have spoken.*” (OUCH!) “*For by your words you will be acquitted and by your words you will be condemned.*”

Jesus is later approached by a group of Pharisees who criticized his disciples for violating the traditions of the elders by not washing their hands before they ate. Jesus responds to them with the words of the prophet Isaiah, *“You hypocrites, Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you. These people honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me.”* Then Jesus called the crowd to him and said, *“Listen and understand. What goes into a man’s mouth does not make him unclean, but what comes out of his mouth, that makes him unclean.”* The words we use are powerful.

Just as the words God spoke in the beginning were a creative force, so also our words cannot be spoken without having some affect. Paul the Apostle, in his letter to the Church in Corinth, speaks to them on the subject of tongues, saying, *“I speak in tongues more than all of you, but in the church I would rather speak five words in an intelligible language to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.”* Words are powerful. Words understood connect one heart to another. Words not understood, at best have no affect, and at worst confuse and discourage.

Were we to take time this morning to do what is referred to in my former tradition as “testify,” we could hear stories from people about words... how words have affected you... how something someone said to you along the course of your journey in life is still with you. Some words linger that are encouraging, some words linger that are challenging.

I remember as a junior high student in the seventh grade, bringing home my first and only D on a report card. To that point in my scholastic career, I had always brought home A’s and B’s. I knew that my father was going to have words for me. He is a man of few words, but when he speaks I try to pay attention. We were at the dining room table having just completed our dinner when he said, “Son, I need to talk with you.”

I thought, “Okay, here it comes. I’m grounded for life.”

Instead, he told me a story. He said, “When I was growing up as a child I had rheumatic fever three times.” We don’t hear much about rheumatic fever these days, but in those days it kept him out of school for significant periods of time, leaving him somewhat behind scholastically. He said, “I struggled. I applied myself and I did my best, but the best I could do were C’s.” He said, “Son, I was proud of those C’s because I knew I had done my best. Son, this D, if it’s the best you can do, be proud of this D.”

I wished he would have just beaten me. It would have been far less painful if he had pulled a switch off a tree in the back yard and whipped me. But he appealed to my reason, to my own awareness that I had really not applied myself. It was not my best. No, I wasn’t grounded, but it motivated me to bring that grade up and I never had another D until I got into college... and that’s another story altogether.

Words can motivate us. Words can also injure us. It’s tragic, but even in the body of Christ we are guilty of injurious words one to another from time to time. I once worked

in a church office where attitudes were at times less than Christ-like. From time to time I even received phone calls from people who were upset and in tears because of something that had been said by a volunteer that was injurious to them. Knowing that I'm guilty also of saying things inadvertently that cause harm to someone, I prayed about what to do. Reminded of the words of Jesus in the 25th chapter of Matthew, "*As you've done unto the least of these, you've done it unto me,*" I made a sign and secured it over the inside of the office door. The sign simply said, "The next person to walk through this door will be Jesus." It was a reminder that what I say, even to someone who does not themselves display the best of attitudes, I'm saying to Jesus. Still, in our humanity, we injure one another with our words. Some people carry those wounds for years.

A few short years ago I was approached at the close of a sermon on reconciliation by a very faithful member of the church I served in Bakersfield. She said, "I understand, pastor. You're talking about forgiveness. But I don't think I'll ever be able to forgive (and she named another long time church member) for what she said to me in 1952." By that time it had been *48 years* and she had not been able to forgive a sister in Christ for injurious words. Words are powerful.

However, just as words can injure, words can restore. The living word of God is a restorative word, a word of grace. We are to be "imitators of God," Paul says, loving and forgiving just as God through Christ loves and forgives. Some of you were at Vacation Bible School this week. As you walked into Sacquety Hall you quickly realized that it had been transformed into the "Compass Rose Café." There on the floor of Sacquety Hall was a very large compass rose. It had been cut out of paper a piece at a time, taped to the floor, and painted over. Very nicely done.

Every night, however, with dozens of kids and adults walking back and forth across the floor, and with chairs scooting and skidding... that compass rose took some abuse. At the end of the evening, that beautiful compass rose couldn't hide the tears, rips, scuffs and scars from simply existing in a human environment. I looked at that rose on Monday night and thought, "Oh it used to be so beautiful. What a shame that it took so much abuse." But something happened overnight. The designer of that compass rose, Frank Rood, without fanfare or complaint, taped over the top of the tears, and painted over the scuffs and scars, so that the next day it was as beautiful as it had been the night before. Restored by the hand of its designer himself.

The good news of the gospel, the living word of God, is that our injuries, received by the words of others, can be healed. We can be restored by the words of our Designer, the healing, restoring God of the universe. You and I, as disciples of Christ, have the wonderful privilege of taking this living, healing, restoring word into our world to touch the hearts and lives of the wounded, the battered, and the abused. "*Be imitators, therefore, of God, and live a life of love just as God in Christ Jesus loved you.*"

May the same mind that was in Christ Jesus be in us. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable unto You, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.