

Sticks and Stones and Words: God's Invitation to the Word William J. Ingersoll
Hebrews 4:12-16, Psalm 19:7-14 First Presbyterian Church
November 18, 2018 Lake Forest, Illinois

Many of us learned the couplet as children; we remember it still as adults: "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." We learned it as a defense against the cruelty of our playmates' taunts and tirades. But is it true?

The little boy, just disciplined by his mother, cries out, "Mommy, I hate you!" Words will never hurt?

A woman, obviously troubled, says to her husband, "We have to talk." "Well, what is it?" he asks. And her words, repressed for months, finally come tumbling out, "I don't love you anymore." Words never hurt?

The doctor walks slowly into the waiting room, her face lined with concern. The family breaks off their conversation and looks up expectantly, anxiously, hopefully, only to hear the doctor say, "I'm sorry, there's nothing more we can do." Words never hurt?

Of course they do! Words can hurt deeply, profoundly. In fact, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me" may rank right up there with "two can live as cheaply as one!" Those two sayings surely are among the most false of all platitudes. For words do hurt.

The late priest Walter Burghardt put it this way, "Two words, 'Sieg Heil,' bloodied the face of Europe. Three words, 'Here I stand,' uttered by Martin Luther, split Christendom asunder. Words made slaves of generations of [African-Americans] and a word from Washington rained atomic [fire] on

Hiroshima.” “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Come on, now!

Yes, words hurt and destroy. Words are used to deceive and to obscure and to distort. We see that in political discourse on a daily basis. Consequently, our generation doesn't trust words very much.

To be sure, this distrust of words is nothing new. Indeed, it has been there almost since the beginning. One way to look at the Genesis story of temptation is to recognize that the situation began to deteriorate in Eden precisely when the serpent began to raise the possibility that words might not be all that they seem, “Did God say . . . ? Did God say you will die? Please understand, those were just words from God; you will not die.” (Genesis 3:1,4)

Yes, at the beginning of creation, words were given to us as a gift from God. Animals make sounds, but human beings form words, with the potential of blessing and promise, meaning and truth. But whatever else we lost in Eden, we lost the trustworthiness of language. People became afraid, and because they became afraid, they began to hide – from God and from each other – behind fig leaves and also behind words.

We hide behind words that blame. From Genesis we read, “Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?” “The *woman* whom *you* gave to be with me, *she* gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate . . .” “The *serpent* tricked me, and I ate.”

We hide behind words that lie. “Where is your brother . . . ?” “I don't know,” replies Cain. “Am I my brother's keeper?”

The minister Tom Long points out that this distrust of words should give us some concern, since the things that we are called to do as Christians are done basically with words. “Financiers have capital; physicians have medicines; farmers have seed and soil; soldiers have guns – Christians have 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.”

So the question before us today . . . and everyday, is simply this . . . How will we use our words? As members of Christ’s church, how do we use them? For blessing or for cursing? For healing or for hurting? For reconciling or for ripping apart? As a help to others? Or as sticks to bludgeon and as stones to pummel? How?

The same question faced the Psalmist in Psalm 19 when he prayed this prayer. “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.” (Psalm 19:14)

The Biblical scholars say that this prayer takes the form of a dedicatory formula that was used for the presentation of a sacrifice in the temple. In other words, it’s a dedication prayer, like one we might use upon receiving the Sunday offering. Or a dedication prayer like we use when baptizing an infant and offering her or him up to God. The Psalmist promised, not just a cereal offering or even a lamb, but all of himself – his mouth and his heart, which is a great sacrifice.

A seminary professor of mine (Dr. William J. Carl) put it this way:

“When you give your mouth and your heart, you’re giving all you can give. You’re saying that person I usually hurt with my words I will never hurt again. That ethnic joke that I tell . . . that racial stereotype I hold on to . . . that evil thought about that person . . . you know Lord. I give it all up now.”

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.”

“Are there times in your own lives,” asks one minister, “when, maybe even by surprise, you’ve discovered that your own words were the homely vessels of such power – the power that changes things? In a world in which words are often so cheap and plentiful, it’s astonishing to discover, nonetheless, that words still have that kind of power.”

Or perhaps “one of you will come into worship some day, wondering if you really ought to be in church feeling the way you feel. Maybe there’s some unfinished business at home or at the office. And you will hear those words of pardon, ‘Friends, believe the Good News: in Jesus Christ, we are forgiven,’ and maybe on that particular occasion, bells will ring and doors open and confetti will fall from the sky, and those words – those repeated, familiar, homely little words – will have power as never before! We’re not always sure about it, but the words we use, the words . . . of faith, have a power to change the reality of things!”

Now let’s be clear. It’s “not just because of something special about the words themselves. That’s important for us to remember. It’s not just the words; it’s something beneath the words that give them power. What gives Christian words power to work for good is the living Word, Jesus Christ,

”sharper than any two-edged sword.” (Hebrews 4:12) Once in a while we see that something, and it’s always stunning.”

A minister friend tells about participating in an ecumenical march concerning a social justice issue. Let me put it in my friend’s words:

. . . “Frankly, that march was a comedy of errors. The Methodists, who were supposed to march by and pick up the Presbyterians, ready and waiting in front of our church, mixed up their signals, and went straight to the Catholic church where they all waited and wondered what was keeping the Presbyterians.

We finally got it all together down at the Catholic church and then about halfway to our destination, someone caught up with those of us leading the march to say, ‘Uh, by the way, it turns out that there’s no guest speaker.’ We had to wing it . . .

Then, while we were marching along there was a problem of what to sing. We knew we had to sing something, but what? ‘Onward Christian Soldiers?’ Too militaristic. ‘We are One in the Spirit?’ Don’t know all the words. Someone suggested ‘A Mighty Fortress.’ But one of the Catholics said, ‘Well, some of us still have a problem with that one.’ It all worked out in the end, but at the time, I was just so aware of all the glitches.

And I was wondering. Just who are we trying to kid? Marching along like this as if we have any power at all to change things?!

There we were. Clergy in our robes . . . someone finally taking charge of the singing, someone else frantically thinking up something to say. By

ourselves, we weren't much more than a bunch of words lying flat in some basket.

But, there was one thing more. The crucial thing. Remarkably, none of us organizers had thought about it. But, as we were starting, someone remembered that we needed it and ran to get it, so that it could take its place in the march. It was the most important thing. Without it, our march would have been an utter disaster, and the words we used would never have had much life.

You know what it was?

It was the cross of Jesus Christ. And, all along . . . there it went leading us and towering ahead of us. Majestic and graceful in its witness, like a well-placed word! Defining who we were, judging and redeeming our context, giving us power,” and hope to face the future. (Dr. Theodore J. Wardlaw)

That cross spoke for itself and told its own story – a story about the “Word who became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14a) – about the Word whose words to us are, “Take up your cross and follow me.” (Mark 8:34b) Yes, my friends, the cross of Christ always goes before us – if only we notice!

It can fill us with courage so that by the mercy of God, our frail words become the earthen vessels for the Word so desperately needed – the Word that is Christ.

And now, in our worship and in our lives, “may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.” Amen.

SOURCES

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