



Lexington Presbyterian Church

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Words

Deut. 11:18-21; Jn. 15:7; 1 Cor. 2:6-13

A sermon by William M. Klein

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¹⁸ You shall put these words of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. ¹⁹ Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ²⁰ Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates, ²¹ so that your days and the days of your children may be multiplied in the land that the Lord swore to your ancestors to give them, as long as the heavens are above the earth. (Deut. 11:18-21 NRSV)

⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. (Jn. 15:7 NRSV)

⁶ Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. ⁷ But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. ⁸ None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹ But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" — ¹⁰ these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. ¹¹ For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. ¹² Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. ¹³ And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual. (1 Cor. 2:6-13 NRSV)

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I am in the midst of a sermon series I am calling "Words of the Faith." This is the twelfth word I've had us consider.¹

Why do such a series? Two reasons really. First, I love words. I love the depth, richness, and vitality of the realities to which words can point.² In fact, I keep a file on my computer of words...words I come across I don't know...words I think are interesting...words I think do a pretty good job of helping me understand realities that are so hard to describe in words. Here are several from my file:

- **ananda** (AH-nan-duh) noun. Pure bliss. From Sanskrit ananda (joy).
- **oniomania** (O-nee-uh-MAY-nee-uh, MAYN-yuh) noun. Excessive, uncontrollable desire to buy things. [From Latin, from Greek *xnios*, for sale, derivative of *onos*, price, + -mania.]
- **pertinacious** (pur-tn-AY-shuhs) adjective 1. Holding resolutely to a purpose, belief or opinion. 2. Stubbornly unyielding. [From Latin *pertinac-* *pertinax*, per-, thoroughly + *tenax*, tenacious (tenere, to hold).]

- **earworms** - noun. Jingles that get lodged in your head that will not leave no matter how much you try.
- **ullage** (UL-ij) noun. The amount of liquid by which a container falls short of being full. [Middle English *ulage*, from Old French *eullage*, from *eullier*, to fill a cask, (from *ouil* eye, hole, from Latin *oculus* eye).]

I love words...the history behind the words...the depth of the plain meanings and subtler meanings. And I am dismayed by the ways in which words rich with meaning can be distorted, trivialized, or made meaningless.

My love for words is one reason I have taken up the theme "Words of the Faith." A second reason is because I find it more and more difficult to understand the words people are using...particularly the words people are using in the political realm...but also the words being used in religious discourse and ordinary conversation.

Writer and Presbyterian pastor, Frederick Buechner, believes words have a way of going directly into the bloodstream. The words you read, the words you hear, the words you speak, become part of who you are. If there is poison in the words, you are poisoned. If there is nourishment, you are nourished. If there is beauty, you are made a little more beautiful.³ Mother Theresa put it this way, "Words which do not reveal the light of Christ increase the darkness."⁴

With Buechner and Mother Theresa's observations in mind...let me ask you. Do your words increase the light or the darkness? Do the words you hear on television and on the radio and in print promote ananda (i.e., joy)? Do they shine forth with the light of Christ or do they obscure his light?

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My point is that the words we use are important...and the words we use to describe God are incredibly important.

Many years ago my Dad introduced me to a book by a Russian dissident named Tatiana Goricheva. She grew up in a Soviet Union where practicing one's faith was very risky. She and her fellow Christians had to meet underground for worship and Bible study, mindful, always mindful of the possibility of arrest and incarceration. And so for them opportunity to share the faith, to speak the words of faith, was exceedingly precious and beautiful.

She longed to travel to Europe or the United States where she could speak freely about her faith. Then she had that opportunity...but what she saw and heard puzzled her. The first religious broadcast she saw on television featured a self-satisfied preacher talking about love. He tossed the words of the faith around as if they had no weight to them. For the first time in her life, Goricheva understood how dangerous words about God can be.

You see, for her, talking about God was so precious she had to choose her words carefully, wisely, prayerfully. Each word was a precious sacrifice - filled to the brim with authenticity.⁵ She wrote her book nearly 30 years ago...what would she think today of our religious and political climate in which too often words are either filled with sound and fury but signify nothing⁶...or they are filled with intimidating and alarming threats.

The words we use to describe God, God's Son, God's Spirit, God's redeeming love, God's providential grace...these words are meant to be life-giving. That is not exactly

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true. The words themselves don't give life. The words are meant to point like fingers to the life-giving God. As people of faith, then, it is incumbent upon us to do our best to make sure the words we use point to the life-giving nature of God.

3

Through his servant Moses, God spoke to the people of Israel who were about to enter the promised land after wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. God said:

*You shall put these **words** of mine in your heart and soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and fix them as an emblem on your forehead. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates...*

What words was he talking about? That a loving God had led the Hebrew children from slavery in Egypt...that God had formed them into his people during the wilderness wanderings...that central to who they were as a people was the 10 Commandments. This history and these words were what the people were urged to recite over and over again, twice a day, fixing them in their hearts and souls.

Through his Son, God said to the disciples:

*If you abide in me, and my **words** abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*

What were the words they were to let abide in them? The unfailing love and mercy of God...that, out of a sense of gratitude, they were to love God with their whole heart, soul, and mind and their neighbor as themselves.

The Apostle Paul had this to say to the Christians at Corinth:

*Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we speak of these things in **words** not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.*

What were these words they were taught by the Holy Spirit? That the love of God is from everlasting to everlasting...that nothing can separate any of us from God's love...that true greatness has to do with becoming a servant.

In the Hebrew language, the language in which the Old Testament was written, the word *dabar* () can mean two things - i.e., word and deed. In other words, a word does not merely **say** something...it **does** something. It brings something into being. It makes something happen.⁷

We learn God's words by reading them, praying them, reciting them, sleeping on them...and in the case of Ezekiel and Jeremiah and John of Patmos, by eating them.⁸ No matter how we get them into us, God's words nourish us...comfort us...shape us...remake us...delight us...confound us...and give us life. As agents of God, as ambassadors, as letters from God (as Paul called the Christians at Corinth),⁹ the words we speak to one another are never just our words; they are nothing less than words from God we pass along. That being the case, why would we of all people speak words that belittle...words that wound and kill?

I was thinking about words that enhance life...and words that do not. Here are some that wound and belittle...words that give people the wrong impression about the God we profess to love and serve.

"I hate you."

"God does not love you or anyone like you."

"You are a joke, a laughing stock."

"I wish you were dead."

Some pretty terrible things to hear. Some truly terrible things to say when you realize every word we speak is supposed to glorify God.

Ok...what about some words that enhance life...

"I love you."

"You are now free."

"I forgive you."

"I am sorry."

"Do not be afraid, I am with you."

"Welcome home."

"Well done, good and faithful servant."

"Depart in peace."

These words have a different feel to them, don't they? These are words that say something and do something. They bring something into being. They embody the grace and peace of Christ.

Christian Wiman, 1988 graduate of Washington & Lee, now teaches literature and religion at Yale Divinity School. He believes that sometimes the language of poetry does a better job of helping us think about certain realities...realities like love or death or hope or eternity. The way poetry uses words can, according to Wiman, "take us to places where reality slips a bit...and suddenly we are perceiving something differently than before."¹⁰

The psalms can do the same thing. So can prayers. You have heard me speak of George MacDonald (1825-1905), a Scottish pastor who was classically trained in physics and chemistry. He wrote fifty-two volumes of poetry, fantasies, novels, and religious writings.

In 1880 his book of prayers were published.¹¹ I have read and re-read this book of prayers many times. Many things strike me about his prayers...but one of the things is that on first reading I rarely have any idea what he's talking about. I understand the words he's used...but I have to bring secondary or tertiary meanings to many of the words. Amazingly, when I do this and read the prayer a second time, the sense of the prayer leaps from the page...and I sometimes gasp.

But to get there takes some work...some effort. It takes slowing down. In order for the words to give life I have to think about what the words mean rather than settling for the simplest, easiest option.

Why is it our days are not filled more with words that give life?

It may be that we cannot change what other people say and do...but we can be careful about what we say and do. Perhaps we can apply ourselves more diligently to the words of our faith...to make times during the day when we remind ourselves the words that come out of our mouths are words from God we are passing along.

When we were toddlers our mothers taught us to think before we speak. It was good advice.

I believe I have told you that I once I had the great honor of being asked to serve on a "clearness committee." When folks within the Quaker tradition have an important decision to make, they can ask a hand full of people to serve on a "clearness committee." This group of people agree to sit with the person who is faced with a decision.

When I had his great honor, the appointed leader of the group described our task this way. She said, "You have been asked to help this person think through an important decision. You have been asked because he sees you as someone who can listen well and has good critical thinking skills. You are being asked to be an ear more than a mouth."

"To be an ear more than a mouth." By this she did not mean we were not to talk. She meant the real gift we could give the person faced with a decision was our attentive, listening ear.

Her instructions changed the way we listened. Rather than half listening, all the while considering what to say next...permission to be an ear more than a mouth was liberating. It allowed us space to let his words soak in and sit there for a while without being expected to respond. When each of us finally spoke, what we had to say was thoughtful. The words we chose were not half-baked. They better fit the task.

As I said at the beginning of this sermon, I love words. That being the case, it occurs to me that the leader's instructions could be very useful in nearly every context... within a marriage, within a church, as parents, as friends, as business people, as neighbors, as civil leaders, as politicians, and on and on. If we could "be more an ear than a mouth" then we may stand a better chance of doing what Paul suggested - i.e., use our words to speak of things not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Holy Spirit. Amen.



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Endnotes:

¹ Other words I've taken up so far in this series are: Alone, Gratitude, Beauty, Work, Friendship, Ground, Vulnerability, Giving, Courage, Doubt, and Confession.

² Buechner, Frederick. 2004. Beyond Words. NY: HarperCollins, vii.

³ Buechner, Frederick. 1992. Listening to Your Life. NY: HarperCollins, 189-190.

⁴ Cannot remember where I came across this quote! sorry.

⁵ Goricheva, Tatiana. 1988. Talking About God Is Dangerous. NY: Crossroad Pub., 90-91.

⁶ An adaptation of words from Macbeth, Act 5, Scene 5: "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."

⁷ Buechner, 1992, 190.

⁸ See Ezekiel 3:1-3; Jeremiah 15:16; Revelation 10:9-10

⁹ See 2 Corinthians 3:1-3.

¹⁰ Tippett, Krista. 2016. Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living. NY: Penguin Press, 228.

¹¹ MacDonald, George. 1994 ed. Diary of an Old Soul. Minneapolis: Augsburg.