

How To Speak

Ephesians 4:25-32

Last week in my sermon series on The Renewal of Community, I spoke about “How to Listen”. Today my sermon is on “How to Speak”—in the Community of Christ, and in the larger community.

All the way through, the Bible addresses the power of speech to do good or ill. We know it all too well in our experience. There a short poem that goes:

Boys flying kites haul in their bright winged birds
but you can't do that when you're flying words....

How many times have you wished you could haul back in words you have said?
How often have you pushed the “send” button too soon and said, “Oh no!”

Psychiatrist Willard Gaylen wrote an article in the 1970s I haven't forgot. He addressed how our public speech has become a form of public littering. The slogan of the day was “Let It All Hang Out”. He urged in rejoinder, “Keep It In!”.

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From beginning to end the Bible addresses how to use speech for good rather than ill, to heal not to harm. The Old Testament addresses it by speaking

of the power of words to bless or to curse. Parents have an unusual power to bless or curse their children through their words. The blessings of the parents is so crucial to their well-being. Parents can also place a curse on their children by how they speak to them and what they say. Sometimes parents unconsciously pass on the kinds of curses they themselves received as children. “You’ll never amount to anything”, is what they say in a hundred variations. There was towel in G.G.’s downtown with a dog painted on it. The dog was saying: “I didn’t know til I was four that my name wasn’t “Bad Dog”.

In the New Testament Jesus addressed the issue of speech in a number of ways. “Let your ‘yes’ be ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ be ‘no’—which concerned the sincerity of our speech. In other words, “Stand by your words!”. In another place he says not to call anyone “moron”. And then he said these challenging words: “By every careless word you will be judged.” On one Sunday at Myers’ Park, in the Talk-Back after the sermon in the fellowship hall, we were talking about homosexuality and the place of gay persons in the church. A wonderful young man named Freddie rose to speak. He was black, gay and almost completely blind, with his service dog John at his side. He told the story of how as a young teenager he had been sitting by his mom watching a Jerry Springer show. On that day’s show were several young gay persons. She said, “If any of my children were like that I’d throw them out of the house!” About ten years later Freddie came out as gay and

went with trepidation to tell his mom. She said, “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” He said, “Remember that day when we were watching Jerry Springer, and you said, “If any of my children were like that I’d throw them out of my house?” She said, “But you’re *my* boy!” Negative messages have a long shelf life.

The book of James addresses the issue by calling the human tongue an arsonist who destroys with fire. He called the tongue, “a restless evil” (James 3:5-10). And he concludes saying “Out of the same mouth we bless God and we curse people made in the image of God!” Out of the same mouth you bless and curse. It’s our choice.

Paul in Ephesians uses the metaphor of clothes to talk about how we live as Christians. He’s not talking about togas, but about morals. So he says: Take off the old clothes of the old way of life and put on the new clothes, the new clothes of the kingdom. Put on Christ! We sometimes outgrow our clothes. And sometimes we try on something from the closet and say, “That looks ridiculous! I can’t believe I once wore that!” So we discard the clothes of the old way of life.

So, in today’s text he says, “Take off falsehood”, then gives the reason, “for we are members of one another.” In the Body of Christ falsehood hurts *all* of us. Rather, he says, “speak truth to our neighbors.”

Then some words wise psychologically, spiritually and relationally: “Be angry but sin not!”. We all get angry, sometimes for good reason. It is part of the human creature’s defense package. Sometimes it helps us free ourselves from someone who is harming us, giving us the energy to leave and move on. *It is not a sin to be angry!* The sin, of course, is in what we do with our anger. We don’t punish our children when we are angry for the damage the anger does. I try not to preach about a subject when I’m angry about it. Sue hears the rough draft of my sermons before I write the final draft. Sometimes she says “That’s a fine rant! Now go write the sermon!” It’s natural to want to strike back when we are hurt. Jesus counsels us against it by saying, “Turn the other cheek.” Jesus would add here: “Don’t hit back with words.” Then Paul adds these wise words, “Don’t let the sun set on your anger.” Resolve it as soon as possible. Anger nursed gets worse.

Now Paul turns specifically to hurtful speech: “Let no evil talk come out of your mouth.” The word evil is sometimes translated “corrupt” or “rotten”. Using the clothes metaphor again, he says: Strip off, *Bitterness*—nursed grievance. C.S. Lewis looked inside his own soul and saw what he called a “harem of fondled hatreds”.

Passion—when you need to get something “off your chest”, don’t!

Anger—that is, angry speech.

Shouting—the voice of the mob.

Cursing—the Greek word is *blasphemia*. If you slander someone who is made in God's image, it is blasphemy against the person and against God.

“And all kinds of *malice*”, he closes, a heart of darkness plotting evil.

I'd add three more kinds today.

1) *Gossip*, that perennial nemesis. We spread news, true or false, with ill intent, or careless intent. You may have heard the twist on the maxim “If you can't say anything nice about somebody...come sit next to me!” It's a moral problem for the one who gossips and places a moral burden on those who listen.

2) *Sarcasm*. Literally it means to “tear the flesh”. Sarcasm thinks itself clever or funny but it cuts others to the bone. It is humor at another's expense. We all need a *sarcasm-ectomy*. I've learned the hard way that sarcasm never belongs in sermons.

3) *Murmuring* or *grumbling*. This is most often practiced in groups, a team sport. It casts aspersions on others. This week I found four times the word grumbling or murmuring was used in the New Testament. Ready?

1) Luke 15:2. Jesus, acting out the gospel, was eating and drinking with tax-collectors, prostitutes and sinners. The righteous folk, scandalized by such conduct were “grumbling”. The Greek word for it even sounds like what it is doing: *diegongelon*. Grumble, grumble, grumble, murmur, murmur, murmur.

2) Luke 19:7. Zacchaeus the despised tax-collector scampered up a tree to see Jesus. Jesus saw him and invited himself to dinner at Zacchaeus’ house. As they walked arm in arm to his house, the righteous folk (who *always* think themselves right) went *grumble, grumble, grumble murmur, murmur, murmur*.

3) John 6: 41. Jesus is talking about being the bread which comes down from heaven. The Jewish leader began murmuring.

4) And here’s the last: Acts 6:1. The new church in Jerusalem was growing, and many of the new comers were Greeks. The church had said it would give aid to all in need, but the newcomers, the Greeks, thought there was favoritism going on and that their widows were being neglected. So the Greeks “murmured against the Hebrews”. Murmuring has a long history in the church.

Now Paul turns to *good speech* in church and offers three criteria;

1) Is it useful for building up or edifying?

2) Is it needful? Does it meet a need?

3) Does it impart grace to others?

So when we are measuring what we should say—which implies we *are* measuring what we say—we ask ourselves:

- 1) Will my words build up others, build up or edify the church, or tear down?
- 2) Do my words fill a need? Is it timely and fitting? Do I really need to say this if it doesn't meet a need?
- 3) And, does it give grace, impart grace? That word grace is *charis* in the Greek. It means both *grace* and *thanks*. Many Christians call communion the Eucharist, using that word. The table is a place of grace and thanks to God.

Our speech can give grace to others. I call it *eucharistic speech*, speech that offers grace to another. We offer our words as bread and wine. We pour God's grace into another's life! When I am thinking about how to respond to someone who I think may have wronged me or who has wronged another, I remember: "I will serve that person communion one day". That changes things. Every month we take communion together. Sometimes you serve each other communion. You never know who you will be next to—let that guide your speech.

Paul concludes with the new clothes we now put on:

And be kind to one another tender-hearted, forgiving one another,
even as God in Christ has forgiven you.

It all begins in the kindness of God.

Will Campbell tells a story about his grandmother Bettye. One Christmas her family gave her a new plaid flannel bathrobe for Christmas. It was beautiful in her eyes. She was so proud of it that the next Sunday she wore it to church, walked down the center aisle to her seat near the front. Her daughter-in-law was scandalized and told her so. But Grandmother Bettye handled it just right. She said, “It’s the prettiest thing I’ve ever seen, and the Lord deserves the best.”

Yes, I think that’s right. The Lord deserves the best, the best we can live and the best we can speak. But there’s one more thing: The bathrobe was a *gift*—and so are the new clothes Christ gives us as we follow him, all of them, from our shoes to our hats, all gifts of grace. He stands ready to help you get them on.