

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
March 12, 2023
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First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV
John 4:5-30

“Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”
(John 4:15 N.R.S.V.)

Words to Live By

Words, words, words - we are surrounded by words. We use words to communicate, but we also use words to manipulate. We use words to inform, but we also use words to misinform. We use words to guide, but we also use words to obstruct and hinder.

It was not always so. In the beginning when God created the universe, there was no divide between the words spoken and reality. God said, “Let there be light.” And there was light. God said, “Let the dry land appear.” And it was so.

Shortly thereafter things changed. The serpent came to Eve and tempted her to eat the forbidden fruit. She said, “We are not allowed to eat that fruit. God said that if we do, we will die.”

The serpent called God’s words into doubt. He said, “Don’t be silly, you won’t die. God is just jealous of you. Go ahead eat it. See what you are missing.”

And so the woman and the man doubted God’s word and ate the forbidden fruit. So spiritual death entered the picture. Along with that came also the divide between what is said and reality. Words lost their power.

Today we see this more than ever. Our politicians use words to lie to us and to mislead us. We don’t like it, but we have come to accept it.

One of people running for state governor several years back promised that if elected, he would make State Route 2 into a four-lane road through the city of Parkersburg. After he was elected this governor rerouted route 2 up Interstate 77 through Parkersburg. Then he renamed the part of route 2 that ran through downtown Parkersburg as Rt. 68. So he claimed that he had kept his promise to make rt. 2 a four-lane road through Parkersburg. But of course, that is not at all what he had promised to do, it was just so many words. And those words had no meaning.

In another state a candidate running for governor made the public statement that his opponent in the race was not fit to be elected as city dog catcher. This candidate was pressured to retract his

smear statement about his opponent. So he printed a retraction in the newspaper that he had was sorry for saying that his opponent was not fit to be elected city dog catcher. That statement was not true, he admitted. He said, "My opponent is fit to be elected city dog catcher." Again words meant to mislead, rather than to reveal.

Much of what our politicians say is just so many meaningless words. It is just words, words, words.

We have also learned to be suspicious of the words used in commercial ads too. One commercial used to claim that "Nine out of ten dentists recommend our toothpaste." Which always made me wonder how many dentists they asked. Did they ask thousands? Or more like did they ask only ten dentists total? Were the dentists they asked hand picked in advance? Were at least nine of these dentists paid in some way to endorse this product? Or maybe the advertizer didn't even bother with that, maybe they just made up the statistic out of thin air. Words, words, words.

Lately I have been hearing an ad for a particular apt for my phone that will pay me cash back on every purchase of gasoline for my car. In the commercial a person who has bought the ad is asked how much it pays him. He replies, "I'll make around \$200."

Now folks, I may have been born at night, but it wasn't last night. I noticed right away that there was no time period mentioned. He didn't say I'll make around \$200 a week, or \$200 a month, or \$200 a year. He may be saying that he'll make around \$200 over the next 50 or 60 years. That part is deliberately left out. It is all just so many misleading words.

The good news is that Jesus came to give us back the power of words. He came to give us words that are life giving rather than life stealing.

John begins his gospel like this: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not over come it."

John is referring to Jesus as The Word. Jesus came to restore to us the power of the word, to connect our words with the underlying reality of what is actually important. Jesus speaks and his words transform people. This is not just so many worthless words. These are the words of life.

Now I invite you to look at the text for today. Jesus and his disciples are traveling through Samaria on their way back to Galilee. Jesus stops by a certain town and sits down to rest beside the well there. His disciples go off into the town to buy food.

As Jesus rests there a Samaritan woman comes by to draw water. Most of the women of the town would have gone to the well early in the morning when it was cool. This woman comes at noon during the heat of the day. That probably indicates that she was a social outcast. She was

avoiding the other women of the time.

At first there are no words spoken, there is only silence between this Jewish man and this Samaritan woman. It is not a comfortable silence. It is a stone cold silence. Jews did not associate with Samaritans. The Jews claimed that associating with the Samaritans in any way defiled them. Moreover, men in that society did not speak to women in public. It just wasn't done in polite society. So there is a wall of silence between this Jewish man and this Samaritan woman.

Then Jesus speaks and shatters the wall. He says, "Would you give me a drink?"

Now walls can be bad but they can also be comforting, familiar, solid. The woman does answer, but she does so by pointing out that Jesus has made a social blunder. Jewish men do not speak to Samaritan women. It just isn't done. Was she trying to rebuild the wall of silence?

Jesus tells her that if she knew who he was, she would ask him for a drink and he would give her living water.

Maybe she doesn't understand Jesus. Or maybe she is just trying to steer the conversation back onto safer grounds. She says, "How are you going to give me water. You don't even have a bucket. Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob?"

Jesus says, "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty."

There is a major shift in the conversation here. The woman says, "Yes, give me some of this living water."

Jesus then tells her to go back and bring her husband with her. She replies that she has no husband. And he tells her that she is right that she has no husband. She has been married five times and every one of those husbands abandoned her and kicked her out. Now she is reduced to living with a man without even the small protections offered by marriage.

Notice that the woman does not immediately leave and get her man. She is intrigued, but she is also uncomfortable and seeks to change the subject. She sees that he is a religious man and thinks that she can get him to talk about theology. That should be a safe enough subject.

She says, "We worship on the mountain, but you Jews say that the only proper place to worship is in Jerusalem. What is that all about?"

Jesus refuses to be drawn off track. He points out that the time has now arrived when people will worship the Lord in spirit and in truth. It won't matter where they are.

She says, "I know that the Messiah is coming and that when he comes he will proclaim all things to us."

Jesus says simply, "I am he, the one who is speaking to you."

The woman is transformed by this conversation with Jesus. Before she was so beaten down by others that she came to the well when it was so hot, no one else would likely be there. But now she goes back to town and tells everyone she meets about Jesus. She is transformed into a powerful evangelist in a moment by the one whose words have true power.

The good news here is that what happened to this woman can happen to us as we listen to Jesus. His words have power. His words can transform our words into life giving and powerful words as well.

We don't always get it right. Sometimes our words are just so many words - just words, words, words. But sometimes by the grace of God we bring the presence of Christ the true word with us.

I was reading about a young pastor who had been called to her first church. It was a rather small congregation and so she decided that she would set a goal of visiting every member of that church within the first six months.

The first six months were nearly up and she had only one family yet to visit. The other church members told her that she didn't need to visit this last family. They hadn't been to church in more than two years and they wouldn't come back because she visited them. She would just be wasting her time.

Nevertheless, the young pastor decided to visit with the family anyway. She went to their house and was invited in. The husband was gone, so it was just her and the wife. The woman invited the pastor to come sit at the kitchen table and have a cup of coffee with her.

At first they talked about small things. Then the pastor asked about what had happened that the couple had stopped coming to church. What was going on in their lives then?

The woman said that she had been at home with her toddler and working in the kitchen. She was busy fixing supper when she suddenly realized that her little boy was not in the room. She went looking for him and found him out back face down in the swimming pool. She called for help, but there was nothing the emergency squad could do.

The woman said that members of the visited her to comfort her after the funeral. She said one of them told her that it was all God's will that her little boy had drown.

The pastor said that she didn't believe that it was God's will.

The woman was instantly angry. She said, well then whose fault was it? You think it was my fault don't you?

The pastor said that she didn't think it was the mother's fault. And she didn't think it was God's fault. She didn't know why it happened. And then she ran out of words. She didn't know what

to say.

The pastor left that day feeling like she had failed. She had put her foot in her mouth and opened up old wounds. Instead of drawing the woman back toward God, she had just made her hurt and angry.

About a week later, the pastor received a call from this same mother. The mother invited her to come back out and talk with her and her husband. She said, all of this time we have been thinking that God was angry with us. Now we are thinking it was the other way around.

The good news is that Jesus came to give us back our words. In so much of our lives we hear only empty words - just words, words, words, - mind numbing and life stealing words.

But we are promised that as Christians, we carry the presence of Christ with us. Through us, through our words, and sometimes through our silences, Christ comes with words of life and light. And that changes everything!

Amen.