“Words Matter”

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John 6:67-69

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The pen is mightier than the sword.

*Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me.*

*The tongue has no bones but it is strong enough to break a heart.*

Which of these statements are true?

Throughout the season of Lent, we are exploring what it means to be a neighbor and how our faith informs our relationships. We thought of Mr. Rogers and his neighborhood and related it to the parable of the Good Samaritan. We considered that we should take Jesus seriously when he commanded us to act with compassion toward “the least of these.” We recognized that fear often holds us back from being loving and kind. Today we focus on the power of words – how what we think or say or write affects others...and ourselves, as well.

In the very first story of the Bible, Genesis chapter 1, God demonstrated the power of language. “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light.” We witness from the outset of God’s self-revelation through scripture that words have power; God *spoke* creation into being.

It was this life-giving power that drew the disciples to Jesus. In the passage we read this morning from the Gospel of John, Jesus’ followers had a choice to make. Many of those who had been drawn to his miracles turned away when Jesus told them how hard it is to follow him. But the twelve disciples stayed. When Jesus asked why, they answered, “Where else could we go? You have the words of life.” They knew that following Jesus’ teaching brought them life.

But we also know all-too-well that words do not *always* bring life. All around us are words that harm rather than help. Case in point: March 20, Rev. Dr. Jerry Kulah, a UM pastor in Liberia, sent an open letter to Rev. Mark Holland. Rev. Holland was a leading proponent of the One Church Plan, a plan that sought to create space for Progressive and Traditional United Methodists to live together. It was an ugly letter. Dr. Kulah, a traditionalist, wrote gloatingly, “your DREAM...has DIED.” He insisted that the present division within our denomination is “what we fasted and prayed for and God answered our prayers.” He urged Rev. Holland to lead Centrist and Progressive congregations in the United States to “move out of our connection.”

Proverbs 18:21 says “Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits.” *The Message* translation is more succinct: “Words kill; words give life. They’re either poison or fruit – you choose.” As followers of Jesus, we know that we are called to choose life. And yet, we often use words to hurt rather than to heal.

Take a moment now for a mental exercise. Think about the last conversation you had with someone about politics, whether in-person, by phone, or online. Think about the words you used in that conversation. How did you characterize those who disagree with you? Whether you were confronting someone whose opinion was different or just speaking about them does not matter. In fact, we are less likely to censor ourselves when we think we are in the safe company of those who agree with us. But that does not relieve us of the responsibility to choose our words wisely and appropriately.

1 https://mainstreamumc.com/blog/key-african-leader-calls-for-split-in-umc/
A study published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences explored the political conflict between American Democrats and Republicans in comparison to the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. The researchers discovered what they refer to as “motive attribution asymmetry.” People on one side of an issue tend to perceive the motivation for their position as love for others in their ingroup more than dislike of the outgroup. At the same time, they attribute their opponents’ position to being motivated by hatred for the outgroup more than love for their own ingroup. In other words, we think our motives are altruistic but our opponents’ motives are spiteful. These tendencies fuel conflict and make it more intractable, diminishing the possibility of negotiation or compromise.²

We can see the pitfall. It is one thing for me to believe that my position is right and someone else’s is wrong. But if I believe I arrived at that position out of love and that those who disagree arrived at their position out of hate, I will likely consider their stance not only wrong but morally wrong. If that is the case, how likely am I to work toward understanding or compromise? This condition is not limited to national politics alone but is a pervasive issue on all fronts. No wonder, according to a study by the University of Southern California, Americans are more divided now than at any point in our nation’s history since the Civil War.³

But there is another side to that coin. Not only are we inclined to think the worst of those who disagree with us, but because we are inclined to think the best of ourselves and our motives and others who hold similar positions, we yield individual decision-making in favor of the judgment of the group, a group that acts with relative impunity, at least in our minds.

We have a word for this: groupthink. Groupthink is what happens when individuals cede their own responsibility in favor of the opinions of their perceived ingroup. Decisions are made out of an urge to conform or to avoid ostracization that comes from dissent. According to Psychology Today, “In a groupthink situation, group members refrain from expressing doubts and judgments or disagreeing with the consensus. In the interest of making a decision that furthers their group cause, members may ignore any ethical or moral consequences.”¹⁴

Columnist Meghan Daum observes that our society has gone beyond groupthink into a deeper realm: groupfeel. She writes, “If groupthink is what happens when people pick and choose their facts, groupfeel is what happens when there aren’t enough facts to work with and we substitute emotion for logic and write off reality as a technicality. That leads to a devastating sort of moral riddle.”¹⁵ In our present climate that considers facts variable and truth to be whatever we decide it is, this has serious implications.

What happens when we abdicate responsibility for thinking for ourselves, abandon rational decision-making, and rely on the emotional expressions of others in our ingroup to determine what is right and good? We elevate passion above reason, use personal bias to determine the value of ideas and the people who share them, and make outrage the currency of public discourse. Anyone who has spent time on social media or reading the comments section of online editorials knows this to be true. I fear we have not yet reached the full extent of this spiral of divisiveness and spite in which we presently find ourselves. Proverbs 12:18 says, “Rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing.”

² “Motive attribution asymmetry for love vs. hate drives intractable conflict” by Adam Waytz, Liane L. Young, and Jeremy Ginges. PNAS November 4, 2014 111 (44) 15687-15692. Online: https://www.pnas.org/content/111/44/15687 (accessed March 27, 2019).
⁴ https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/groupthink
Last week, Bishop Dyck referenced a New York Times Op-Ed by Arthur Brooks in which he details our present “culture of contempt.” He defined contempt as a “noxious brew of anger and disgust” that extends beyond ideas to the people who generate them. Contempt renders those who disagree not only as wrong but as utterly worthless. The sources that stoke the fires of contempt are all around us: divisive politicians and pundits, entertainment news media, angry activists, and just about everything we read on social media. Worse, we have found a way to use ideological division as a profit-generating enterprise. Every time we click on a sensationalized story, every time we subscribe to user-selected content, every time we tune in to a partisan broadcast, we feed what Brooks calls the “outrage industrial complex.” In the process, we are destroying not only the fabric of our society, but our own happiness. Studies show that engaging in such virulent division leads to anxiety, depression, and sadness.6

How should we, as people of faith, respond? James 3:9-10 observes, “With (the tongue) we both bless the Lord and Father and curse human beings made in God’s likeness. Blessing and cursing come from the same mouth. My brothers and sisters, it just shouldn’t be this way!” The writer goes on to say that such actions come from following the ways of the world rather than the way of Christ. We are urged to adopt instead the wisdom from above, which is “pure, ... peaceful, gentle, obedient, filled with mercy and good actions, fair, and genuine.”

As Christians, we need to take a step back from the cultural norms of our time. Before aligning ourselves with a group – political, ideological, or theological – we need to remember that our primary identity is found in Christ. Each one of us is a sinner redeemed by grace, a grace made possible by the cross of Jesus Christ. Any goodness or rightness we may claim pales in comparison to who we are because of God’s grace in Jesus Christ. The grace that saves us demands that we also treat one another with grace and compassion.

Instead of fanning the flames of outrage in our conversations or social media posts, instead of piling on incendiary words of opposition and discord in our comments – no matter how much we agree or disagree – what if we refrain from engaging in back-and-forth vitriol? Or, what if we engage the conversation but do so as peacemakers, offering words that are pure, peaceful, gentle, filled with mercy and goodness, fair, and genuine? I wonder what impact a few hundred faithful Christ-followers could make in the circles we touch. We may not change the world, but we will impact the lives of those closest to us. Who knows how far that might go? James goes on to say, “Those who make peace sow the seeds of justice by their peaceful acts.”

I am not suggesting that we become doormats or that we hide our true feelings to create false harmony. We cannot avoid conflict, nor should we, but that does not mean we should seek to provoke it. The truth is that sometimes the best response is no response. Just as a fire goes out without oxygen, so the intensity and rage of uncivil discourse dissipates without reaction. But when conflict comes, disagreeing agreeably is healthy. We should exchange ideas, not soundbites. We should not simply repeat what others have said but think for ourselves, pray for guidance, and see where God leads us in our hearts. And remember that while we are made in the image of God, so are those who disagree with us.

Our focus throughout this year at Church of the Saviour is serving God by serving others. The scripture foundation for our theme bears repeating, especially in light of our present study:

Love should be shown without pretending. Hate evil and hold on to what is good. Love each other like the members of your family. Be the best at showing honor to each other. Don’t hesitate to be enthusiastic—be on fire in the Spirit as you serve the Lord! Be happy in your hope, stand your ground when you’re in trouble, and devote yourselves to prayer. Contribute

to the needs of God’s people, and welcome strangers into your home. Bless people who harass you—bless and don’t curse them. Be happy with those who are happy, and cry with those who are crying. Consider everyone as equal, and don’t think that you’re better than anyone else. Instead, associate with people who have no status. Don’t think that you’re so smart. Don’t pay back anyone for their evil actions with evil actions, but show respect for what everyone else believes is good. If possible, to the best of your ability, live at peace with all people.

— Romans 12:9-17 (CEB)

On April 20, 1999, Columbine High School was the site of nightmarish trauma. Two students terrorized the school, killing 12 students and one teacher before turning their weapons on themselves. The first of the students killed that day was Rachel Joy Scott. In the days that followed that senseless tragedy, many students reached out to her parents to share the impact her words of encouragement had on them. Her simple acts of kindness brightened many lives, even preventing one student from taking his own life during a dark time. Inspired by her legacy and moved to honor her memory, Rachel’s parents started a non-profit organization called Rachel’s Challenge. They offer presentations in schools and community organizations around the country that teach kids to be kind to one another, to offer words of encouragement and hope instead of criticism and harassment. In the 19 years since its inception, an estimated 25 million people have been touched by Rachel’s story in schools all over the country, significantly reducing instances of bullying and violence. The program documents that an average of 150 suicides are prevented each year by these presentations. Rachel’s words of life still resonate, breaking down walls and building a better world, inspired by her faith and the faith of her family.⁷

Words have the power to build or to destroy, to wound or to heal. How will the words you say impact the world around you? The choice is up to you. As we close today, I want to offer a call to action. It is an action you can take when you get home today or, better yet, you can do it right now if you have a smart phone with you. Think of someone who could use a word of encouragement. Maybe it is a person who is struggling with something in their lives right now, maybe it is someone that you have a hard time loving, maybe it is someone you recently had an argument with from whom you need to seek forgiveness and healing. Offer encouragement – a positive, peaceful word – in a text message or through social media. If you prefer to do this when you get home, consider sending a note or making a phone call or, better yet, meet in person. However you choose, use your voice to offer a word of life. And see what God will do with that one act of kindness. Words matter. It’s up to us to use them to live our faith, to transform our culture of contempt into a culture of hope. May it be so. Amen.

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⁷ https://rachelschallenge.org/