

Gates Presbyterian Church

Wordly Wise

September 12, 2021

When my son, Tristan, was in fourth grade, his class began a three-year journey through a series of workbooks called *Wordly Wise*. The work was all about grammar and words, their roots, their meanings, their suffixes and prefixes.

Working through the exercises every week was tough – he was often bored and rebelled against the long lists he had to memorize and the practice sentences he had to complete. In the end, though, it was worth the time he invested in forming good habits, and he continues to reap the benefits of the strong foundation he built when he is called upon to write or speak in school or in his work at the lab.

I thought of Tristan's *Wordly Wise* experience this week as I was pondering our reading from James and the deep importance of using our words to build up rather than break down the communities we inhabit. Far from that old rhyme – sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me – words *do* contain the power to injure and the power to heal. James suggests that practicing a habit of careful speech, listening long and speaking late, forms a vital spiritual practice that determines how well we can live out our faith in our daily life.

Particularly now, in a context where so many issues are viewed in starkly black and white terms and so many of us are willing to respond with the most extreme position possible, words matter more than ever. Forming good habits of speech matters. Practicing a resistance to speaking without thinking and a willingness to hear the other side, truly hear, before we blurt out our position matters. Seeking the good first and speaking that good into our communities matters.

At the very beginning of our bible, God speaks our world into existence, calling forth night and day, water and dry land, plants and all the creatures that walk the earth, along with *us* – human beings made perfectly in God's image.

God sees all these things and God calls them good.

Psalm 19 beautifully describes how the heavens themselves tell of God's glory, day to day pours forth speech and night to night declares knowledge. The tiniest details of our natural world proclaim the beauty and perfection of

God's creation, inviting us to remember our own perfection as children of the living God imprinted with God's image.

But too often, we lose touch with this goodness that God proclaims for all of God's creation. Like the people in Noah's time who stopped walking with God and filled their communities with idol worship and corrupt behavior, we, too, fall away from God, forgetting our inherent goodness and lashing out at one another in a mistaken attempt to feel safe, important, valued, visible, whole.

Yesterday, we marked the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks on our nation. This day comes in the context of our chaotic departure from Afghanistan after twenty years of war there and in the midst of a global pandemic that seems to find new life every time we think we see an end in sight.

Words in this moment matter. Words shape our perspectives, they inform our reality, they create new circumstances, good and bad. Words can raise armies or spark healing. They can cause deep divisions or bring new peace.

We've all had the experience of speaking without thinking, hearing the words unspool from our lips and knowing, even as they reverberate around us, that they have done irreparable harm. We wish them back but that cannot be.

This month, many of our soldiers have had the experience of watching in anguish and disbelief as the promises they made to Afghans who helped them are left unfulfilled as our military withdraws and they are left alone and vulnerable to the Taliban's possibly deadly retaliation. Promises made have been broken. Words meant to guarantee safety and wholeness, now standing unfulfilled, are giving way to betrayals that for many may result in physical harm and even death.

Words matter deeply.

Many of us here will remember that day twenty years ago when the planes struck the towers, plunged into the Pentagon and crashed into a field. Chip and I were living just outside DC at the time. On that terrible day, he was at work at the Naval Research Lab and I was at home with Tristan. That morning, I felt the shudder of the plane powering into the Pentagon a few miles away. I thought we had had another earthquake until my mother-in-law called me, frantic with worry about Chip, afraid he had been at the Pentagon that day.

Time slowed down for us. Hours passed when I could not reach Chip – he had been locked down in the lab with reports of armed gunmen on the property. Finally, after hours on the road, he made it home and we all gathered at our church, taking stock.

Had our friend Chris been at his desk in the Pentagon that day? No, he had gone to visit his Dad – and his daughter, late for her interview at the World Trade Center, was still on the subway when the towers were hit.

Our community was filled with service members, and the tragedy for many of us was made personal in the faces of those lost; in the stories of the children in the Pentagon day care being ushered to safety. For months afterward, we could not reach our church in the usual way, the road passing the Pentagon having been closed until further notice. Even as we drove the new paths, we could still see the broken side of the Pentagon, a regular reminder of the power of hatred in the world.

We don't know of course, how that plan got hatched. We don't know what fearful, hateful words were spoken that created a reality of death and terror and destruction. But surely, this was an example of what happens when hatred and fear are allowed to take over our minds, to create a reality that sees only possibilities of violence and names them glory.

We lost more than three thousand people that day. Many more have perished since in the “war against terror.” As we leave Afghanistan, many are wondering if that twenty year effort has changed anything at all. And now, we find ourselves in the slow unwinding of a different but even more deadly tragedy as we face the COVID 19 pandemic. On the worst day of the virus surge, more than 5000 people died in our country. Weeks have gone by where every day, the death toll exceeds the total loss of 9/11.

This pandemic tragedy, unfolding in slow motion and deadly beyond our worst expectations, has also been affected by words – words that spread misinformation about the virus, about its risks, and about the vaccine. Words that create divisions and incite violence. Words that demonstrate selfishness and false theologies. Words that call us to act with only our own desires to be considered and without regard to how our decisions might affect our neighbors.

But other words have been spoken too. Words that offer encouragement and appreciation. Words that try to bring healing and rebuild community. Words

that reflect God's proclamation that everything is created good and that invite us to be part of that goodness by participating in supporting the healing and the wellbeing of all our neighbors - even at the expense of our own discomfort or inconvenience.

The tongue, says James, is a fire, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord *and* we curse those made in the Lord's likeness. How can we do both and not be in conflict within ourselves and with the One who made us?

In the end, we cannot speak both death and life into the world. We will have to choose.

After the 9/11 tragedy, we were invited into two new realities – we could choose hate and fear; or we could choose life and shalom. Immediately afterwards, I remember the deep feeling of community care we experienced in Washington. Strangers greeted strangers, asking how they were, offering a helping hand, providing a listening ear. We banded together, small differences forgotten as we put the wellbeing of others before petty arguments and divergent perspectives. I often heard people saying, we will not let this hatred define us. We will not respond with more hate and fear. We choose to focus on life.

But this was not the only response. As time went by, some of us doubled down on hatred and fear. Our Muslim siblings experienced an increase in hate speech directed against them, an increase in vandalism at mosques and bullying at school. Many began jumping to conclusions, equating Islam with violence and terrorism and acting on appearances alone; A Sikh man was shot and killed in TX when someone thought he was Muslim.

Belligerent language fanned flames of fear and hatred. Our Muslim siblings faced increased workplace discrimination and repeatedly found no relief in our courts, despite our nation's stated commitment to refrain from discrimination on the basis of religion. We turned a blind eye when people made global statements about how "all muslims...." embodied this or that negative characteristic. We stood by as Muslim bans were enacted and entire people groups dismissed as unworthy or less than. As people spoke angry and hateful words into the world, these words bore the fruits of paranoia and implicit bias, of small unkindnesses and large acts of violence.

When a white man blew up a building in Oklahoma, our nation didn't suddenly turn against all white men. And yet when a few extremist Muslim

men engaged in a terrorist act, suddenly we were willing to turn against all who followed Mohammed and Islam.

How does any of this fit with Jesus' call to love our neighbor – our Muslim neighbor and our Jewish neighbor, our Black neighbor and our white neighbor, our healthy neighbor and our ill neighbor, our able-bodied neighbor and our differently abled neighbor, our old neighbor and our young neighbor.

How does this fit with the call to live out our faith, not just as hearers of the word but as doers also; not just as one who claims allegiance to God but as one whose living faith is reflected in loving action in the world?

To truly live out our faith is to speak it into existence in concrete ways that build up the good that God planted in all of God's creation. It means watching what we say and asking ourselves, before speaking, is it necessary, is it helpful, is it kind? Too often, we speak to make ourselves feel better – to ease our insecurities, or cover our pain, or hide our guilt. We gossip and we lash out when we should remain quiet and offer a compassionate, listening ear. We justify our choices by pointing at the “other” about whom we speak, blaming them for our bad choices. But at the end of the day, we must quietly contemplate our actions, asking, “today, did I honor God in my relationships with others, with the earth, with myself? Did I proclaim God's love in my words and my deeds?”

Each of us is responsible, every day, for the choices that we make, for the words that we speak.

And it doesn't stop there. For James, our ability to speak against an unjust world, or our decision to accommodate that world by remaining silent, affects whether we can enjoy a future with God. When our language does not reflect what we claim to believe, this brokenness in us negatively affects whether we can remain in relationship with the God whose endless love reaches out to all of us.

As spiritual leaders of the church, the words of our session elders and deacons, our trustees and congregational teams, our worshipers and worship leaders, all shape how our community lives together and how we focus our attention. As spiritual people in our communities, the words of all of us listening today contribute to how our community prioritizes use of its resources and how it treats its members. As spiritual members of our families, we impact the quality of life together choosing whether our words

will build trust or generate rifts. What we say in all these spaces shapes how we view ourselves, our families and friends, and our world.

Words, repeated often, bear their own fruit, whether it is whole and nourishing or rotten and poisonous is up to us. What words do we choose to speak? What words do we choose to hear? How good are we at identifying the good fruit from the poisonous?

When we allow the poison our tongues can hold to permeate our communities, our connection to the One who gives us wisdom lessens, and we risk entering instead the fire that James warns us about. It is a certain kind of living hell to be in community with those who claim to be followers of Jesus but make choices that deny life to their neighbor. So many words are out there in the world – so many talking heads are willing to tell us what we want to hear. How do we discern what is true? What is worthy of our time and attention?

A couple of years ago, my small congregation suffered a serious conflict among old friends, one of whose Facebook posts were increasingly promoting hateful ideas that harmed long time friends. In the end, we confronted the trouble in worship, talking about how we respond to conflict and what we are called to do and be as followers of Jesus. We also talked about some concrete ways to monitor our own intake of news and information. Together, we studied a media chart compiled by a neutral platform that places various news sources on the spectrum of bias – showing who sits on the far left or right, who shows a small bias, who reports both sides of an issue.

How enlightening it was for us to look at where we each spent most of our time. What words were we listening to? What ideas were we regularly consuming? How often, we asked ourselves, did we seek out a story from a quadrant other than the one we generally inhabited? How willing were we to hear where “the other side” was coming from?

It was hard painful work to have this conversation together, but it paid off in a deeper understanding among the long-time friends and new insights for all of us about how words, especially the public words of our newscasters and bloggers, journalists and Facebook posters, impact how we understand and experience the world.

One of the things we talked about that day was the importance of weighing the opinions we were forming against the backdrop of Jesus’ call to live a life

that loves all and welcomes all; a life that focuses on freedom and release, on wholeness and human flourishing. Do our words and perspectives match what Jesus taught? It seems obvious, but so often we get caught up in the world and forget to reconcile it with our faith.

We must ask, do our words promote the lessons Jesus taught, or do they encourage fear and hatred to thrive? Of course, sometimes we will speak words that result in passionately negative responses from people who oppose them. Sometimes to speak God's truth *is* to cause disruption. And Jesus showed us how valuable that disruption could be, causing the world to pause and examine its impulses in order to shift to a new path.

To speak carefully does not mean to upset no one, indeed, those who are comfortable with the status quo that promotes bias, or inequality that favors them, will not be happy to hear the God-talk that James calls us to engage in. We must not confuse another's negative reaction to our words with the idea that they are inappropriate, unkind or wrong. The world will always fight to maintain its own power over God's desire to lift the vulnerable and the left out.

Good words, Spirit inspired words, can be recognized by their commitment to follow Jesus' commandments regardless of whether that produces a positive or a negative response from the listeners. Words matter not just because we can utter some that make others feel comfort or strength, companionship or protection, but also because they can spark change that moves the world just a little closer to the vision God had when God created everything good.

This week, as we ponder what it means to follow Jesus, let us be especially mindful of the words we choose to speak and those we elect to keep unsaid; those we choose to hear and those we reject; those we allow to inspire us and those we speak out against. Let us choose blessings over curses and prophetic truth over silence. Let us be Easter people whose lives and words reflect the Jesus creed we claim to follow.