

Dear Friends

Greetings! I do hope this finds you well. This weekend my wife Betty and I are preaching in three sacred spaces a total of four times, so we wrote a sermon together. She will be leading worship at John's Creek Christian Church in the morning, and I'll be serving in our home church in Decatur in the AM and then at the Campbell-Stone retirement community in Sandy Springs in the PM. Good times. For those who may not be aware, the Rev. Betty C. Brewer-Calvert is the Director for Women's Ministries for the Christian Church in Georgia. May the blessings and peace of Christ be with you and yours.

Shalom,

James

“Sticks and Stones: Speaking Truth in Love”

Sermon for

John's Creek Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Georgia

First Christian Church of Decatur (Disciples of Christ), Georgia

Campbell-Stone Retirement Home in Sandy Springs, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, September 16, 2012

By: The Revs. Betty C. and James L. Brewer-Calvert

Holy Scriptures: Mark 8: 27-33; James 3: 1-12; Psalm 23

Mark 8: 27-33

27 Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, **“Who do people say that I**

am?”²⁸ And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.”²⁹ He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.”³⁰ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹ Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.³² He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him.³³ But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

James 3: 1-12

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.² For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.³ If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies.⁴ Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs.⁵ So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!⁶ And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.⁷ For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species,⁸ but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.⁹ With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God.¹⁰ From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters,

this ought not to be so. ¹¹ Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? ¹² Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

The power of words

In the epistle lesson for today from the Book of James,

we are urged to control our tongues.

James said:

*“If we put bits into the mouths of horses that they may obey us,
we guide their whole bodies.*

Look at the ships also;

*though they are so great and are driven by strong winds,
they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of
the pilot directs.*

So the tongue is a little member and boasts of great things.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire!

And the tongue is a fire." (James 3: 2-6a)

May the grace of God direct our speech toward blessing,
and away from cursing and insulting and harmful speaking.

Speech is a marvelous tool,
capable of amazing accomplishments in devotion to God's
works.

However, good speech in and of itself is not enough.

Blessings and affirmations without practice and actions to back
them up

are as shallow as the puddle on your driveway.

Gustavo Gutierrez said, "*Christian orthodoxy demands
orthopraxis.*"

This is a fancy way of reminding us that

strict Christian words and beliefs

demand strict Christian practice and action.

Practice what you preach.

The words you preach and teach and offer to the world have power.

You have the power to save and heal and forgive.

You also have the power to hurt and harm and damage.

We have word choices to make every day;
our word choices make a difference.

The power of words

When I was a kid,

there was a retort we'd throw back in the faces of anyone who insulted us –

*“Sticks and stones may break my bones,
but words can never hurt me.”*

It wasn't true, but it gave the illusion of a wall, a defense,

so that the insult-flinger

would not have the satisfaction of thinking he or she had inflicted harm.

James speaks to the church and community about the he power of words,

pointing out that from the same mouth come blessing and cursing;

the same mouth that blesses God

may curse those made in God's image.

Ironic. Symbiotic. Prophetic.

Hypocritical, perhaps? At the very least, very sad, very true, and very hopeful.

If we are strong and brave and faithful enough

to look at our actions in the proverbial mirror of the Gospel,

then we shall have this gift of hope

that by the grace of God

our words and actions and very lives

may be transformed.

The power of words

When we want to say something less than complimentary about someone we know,

and – at the same time – want to ease our conscience

about talking about someone else, we add on,
“Bless her heart.”

“She is as dumb as a doorpost, bless her heart.”

“He has never been able to manage money, bless his heart.”

Our modern-day version of “*Bless her heart*” is “*Just sayin’....*”

Adding on that little phrase somehow makes it culturally permissible

to say whatever is in our mind at any given moment –

“*You really need to bathe more often – just saying!*”

“*You need to act your age – just saying!*”

Some folks think that addendum lessens the blow of the hurtful words

and takes away any responsibility of the one uttering the words -- *just saying*.

We have other, similar phrases we use in our everyday vernacular

to say whatever we want without claiming responsibility.

Ignore the man behind the curtain...

Don't mind me...

It's just my opinion...

Whatever...

The power of words

Language matters.

Our words have power.

Whether spoken with our lips or communicated through our hands,
words have power.

Christian faith bears a social responsibility to speak and write with
civility.

The tongue is a fire, says James, a restless evil full of poison.

So, my friends, think first before you speak or send.

Curses cut deep;

insults and slights and put downs are tough to forgive and
forget,

even for the holiest of souls.

Words once spoken cannot be retrieved.

Letters sent cannot be retrieved.

Words written on Facebook or Twitter or in an email carry on.

Words may take on a life of their own.

Once you hit the “Send” button, there is no retrieval, no going
back.

My [husband/wife] and I advised our kids from their earliest days
on Facebook

to take caution in what they posted,

and to ask their friends to refrain from posting on
their pages

ugly words or messages that exhibited hate
or profanity,

disrespect for others, intolerance, or
pettiness.

The latest craze around the world is tweeting.

We've seen how it can be used for good,

like when it helped spur democratic revolutions

in Egypt and across the Middle East.

We've also seen how it can be used for ill

to malign, denigrate, and make others into something less
than human.

Are you like me, offended by some of the public tweets sent back
and forth

in connection with the recent political conventions?

Now anyone who wants to can simultaneously watch the evening
news

and tweet about something they know absolutely nothing
about

and then happily watch their words scroll

across the bottom of their 54 inch high-def

TV screen.

The unfettered freedom of speech we've claimed

has led us into the temptation of objectification.

We allow ourselves to say whatever we want,

whenever we want, about whomever we want, in any manner we want.

The Gospel dares to remind us, to admonish us, and to encourage us

that our words, whether written or spoken, private or public,

are a reflection of our character and our integrity.

Our choices of words show what we believe;

they give light to our basic tenets;

they help shape our relationships with those whom God has created.

The power of words

A few years ago my friend Donald Anthony, who lives in Tennessee,

had a part time job at the "Jackson Sun" newspaper office,

working in the circulation department on Sunday mornings.

Donald answered the phone and had newspapers sent out to people
who did not get their Sunday morning edition.

When it didn't rain, the phone rarely rang
and he would slip out to worship Jesus Christ with us.

But when it did rain, the office phone rang off the hook.

This is a typical message he received:

“Hello, is this the Jackson Sun?”

“Yes, this is Donald Anthony for the circulation department. How
may I help you?”

“You blankety-blank idiots!

Don't you know how to deliver newspapers?

*My paper was thrown in the mud by your blankety-blank
delivery person.*

Now the paper is soaked, I'm late,

and it's time for me to go to church!”

Donald told this story with a smile, yet deep down he was hurting;

he asked his pastor why a Christian would use such hurtful
language.

You and I may own the world's largest King James Version of the
Bible

and have perfect attendance in Sunday school and worship,

yet the moment we treat one another in such a manner,

we are empty gongs and clanging cymbals,

we are dry land with no vision of crocus blossoms,

we are blind with no hope for either sight or insight,

we are deaf and our ears need to be unstopped.

The power of words

When Jim Wallis was a university student,

every Christian group on campus tried to evangelize him

and get him to join their church or fellowship group.

No one was successful in drawing Jim Wallis in.

His basic response to their preaching was,

“How can I believe when I look at the way the church lives?”

The Christians answered, *“Don't look at the church; look at Jesus.”*

Today Jim Wallis is a Christian minister of the Gospel,

living and working in the Sojourners community

in the heart of an inner-city community in
Washington, DC.

Wallis reflects on his college years and says,

*“I now believe that statement [Don't look at the church;
look at Jesus.]*

is one of the saddest in the history of the church.

*It puts Jesus on a pedestal apart from the people who name
his name.*

Belief in him becomes an abstraction

*removed from any demonstration of its meaning in
the world.*

*Such thinking is a denial of what is most basic to the
gospel: incarnation.*

People should be able to look at the way we live

*and begin to understand what the gospel is all
about.*

*Our lives must tell them who Jesus is and what he cares
about.”*

(Wallis, The Call to Conversion)

The power of words

People should be able to hear our words and thus hear the love of
Christ.

People should be able to read our texts and tweets,
emails and social network postings
and thus experience the love of God for the people
of God.

The Letter of James describes the tongue
as a small member that boasts great exploits.

Words have power to cause great harm.

Poison spread in the form of words from our mouths or from our
fingers

hurts because it seeps in deep and it spreads.

Poisonous words spread to all the corners
and becomes so much a part of our daily lives
that we don't remember what life was like
beforehand.

We seem to forget how to talk with one another
about the important issues in a climate of civility.

We forget how to share our differences
in a way that allows for a meeting of the minds.

We forget that Christ calls for us to share a common desire for
unity within diversity,
for peace with justice.

Would you like to remember what it means to speak your truth in

love?

The art of holding one's tongue means knowing when speaking is necessary and helpful,

and knowing when to keep silent.

What does the Christian faith teach that you find most valuable:

the right to say whatever comes to mind

or being in positive relationship with someone also made in God's image?

What words bring you to the intersection of reconciliation and righteousness?

What do you think are the connecting points

between understanding and being understood?

When you communicate, what is your priority? Your goal? Your hope?

The power of words

The late Robert Calvert (1889 - 1969) had many gifts,

including the sacred art of letter writing.

My [husband's] grandfather could write a letter in such a way

that the reader could clearly understand and appreciate

what Robert Calvert was seeking to communicate.

In order to accomplish that goal,

Robert Calvert would first imagine himself

in the place of the one who was going to read his words.

He wondered, “*What are the reader’s needs?*”

What words or images would be most helpful in this communiqué

for the gist of the message to be delivered?”

It was as if before Robert Calvert put pen to paper or began to type,

he was already sitting in someone else’s seat,

opening and then reading the letter through another soul’s eyes.

We call such a gift empathy, creativity, compassion, other-centeredness, civility.

He had this gift, a skill he achieved because he worked at it because he cared.

You and I may have this gift, this skill, this blessing as well.

To attain such a skill requires effort.

It begins by caring for the one who is the recipient of our communiqués.

The words we use can care before they are expressed;

our words may help and heal and practice hospitality

when we seek first to understand before being

understood.

We call that effort one that respects **the power of words**.

I am intrigued that when the Letter of James speaks of the power of words,

the author starts by speaking of teachers.

Teaching, preaching, proclaiming, communicating and our word choices are related.

Life and love and the grace of God present to us the gift of “teachable moments.”

As Fred Craddock points out,

“Any subject that bears upon life bears upon preaching.”
(Preaching, p. 30)

Dr. Craddock goes on to say that,

“No day passes without an opportunity to tell a story,

talk with children, converse with the elderly,

discuss with friends, tell a joke, give directions to a traveler,

describe a scene, or share feelings.” (Preaching, p. 20)

Fred Craddock reminds us that whether we choose to be or not,

each of us is a teacher at any given moment.

And there is an even greater responsibility

on those who have professed our faith in Jesus Christ
for we represent HIM.

What do we teach? What do we model?

Are we spreading poison or are we spreading love?

The power of words

I just finished reading a powerful novel by Markus Zusak entitled
The Book Thief.

The Book Thief tells the story of a young girl living in the midst of
Nazi Germany.

She decries the power of words

citing the ability of words to build fear and hatred,
to divide, to incite violence, to shape behavior,
and indeed to shape a nation.

We read:

She tore a page from the book and ripped it in half.

Then a chapter.

Soon, there was nothing but scraps of words

littered between her legs and all around her.

The words – Why did they have to exist?

Without them, there wouldn't be any of this.

Without words, the Fuhrer was nothing.

There would be no limping prisoners,

*no need for consolation or wordly tricks to make us
feel better.*

What good were the words?

Words are a primary indicator of our faith.

In the second chapter of James, he says, “*Faith without works is dead.*”

Words are a “work.”

What good are the words?

Our words work, for they have the power to exhort and persuade.

Our words teach, express compassion, show remorse.

They embrace with warmth, they calm, they energize, and they encourage.

Though the mouth is small, it boasts of great exploits.

Though the bridle is but a small tool in a horse’s mouth,

it can control the direction of the horse.

We can control the direction of our speech,

making it a tool for good or for ill.

Good words and good will and good works are gifts of God for the people of God.

The power of words

Calvin and his stuffed tiger friend, Hobbes, were talking one day.

Calvin said, *“I feel bad that I called Susie names and hurt her feelings.”*

“I am sorry I did it.”

Hobbes responded, *“Maybe you should apologize to her.”*

Calvin pondered the suggestion, and then said,

“I keep hoping there is a less obvious solution.”

When we want to restore our relationship with God,

with one another, with our true self,

we do well to remember

that God has a liking for the obvious
solution.

Words spoken with love and grace

have the power to be the obvious solution.

Preach what you practice...

...and you will be filled

*with all the power of the Creator, the Son, and the
Holy Spirit. Amen!*