

"Seven Words We Don't Use in Church"

7 Week Sermon & Worship Series
Sundays, July 15 – August 26, 2018
First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Preaching: Senior Pastor Rev. Dr. James L. Brewer-Calvert

Date	Theme	Holy Scriptures
July 15	SMILE	I Thessalonians 5: 14-18
July 22	CURSES	Psalms 19; Matthew 15: 1-13
July 29	GOSSIP	Proverbs 12: 18; James 3: 9-12; 1 Corinthians 13
August 5	SCIENCE	Genesis 1
August 12	PRONOUNS	Matthew 7: 7-12
August 19	SHAME	John 4
August 26	SEX	Song of Solomon

Sunday, July 22, 2018

"CURSES"

Scriptures: Psalm 19 and Matthew 15: 1-13

Psalm 19 (NRSV)

¹The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. ²Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. ³There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; ⁴yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun, ⁵which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy, and like a strong man runs its course with joy. ⁶Its rising is from the end of the heavens, and its circuit to the end of them; and nothing is hid from its heat.

⁷The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple; ⁸the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes; ⁹the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

¹⁰More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb. ¹¹Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

¹²But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults. ¹³Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.

¹⁴Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Matthew 15: 1-13 (NRSV)

Then Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, ²"Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat." ³He answered them, "And why do you break the commandment of

God for the sake of your tradition? ⁴ For God said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.' ⁵ But you say that whoever tells father or mother, 'Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,' then that person need not honor the father. ⁶ So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God. ⁷ You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:

⁸ *'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; ⁹ in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.'*

¹⁰ Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: ¹¹ it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." ¹² Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" ¹³ He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted."

We are Called to Holiness

The late Rev. Ralph Smith was our Pastor here for 19 years.
He was our Associate Pastor for 3 years and Senior Pastor for 16 years.
After he retired from ministry, I asked him about his lifelong service as a minister.
I loved his answer.
"I was blessed to be in the role of the pastor," said Ralph. *"A pastor is to be present for the hatching, matching and dispatching of God's people."*

Nice.

One of the legends told about Rev. Ralph Smith's tenure
at First Christian Church of Decatur
took place right here, in the Sanctuary.
They say that one Sunday morning,
as he presided over Holy Communion,
he astutely noticed that one of the two candles
on the Lord's Table had gone out.

"I can fix that," he thought.

So, he pulled out a book of matches to resolve the problem.
However, no sooner had he struck a match
when the whole matchbook burst into flames.

In sudden pain, he exclaimed an oath,
which was, naturally, broadcast over the sound system
for all of Christ's Church to experience
and, this being the Body of Christ,
for God's people to remember and retell with relish.

Fine man.

If nothing else, his communion experience
of being oh-so-human as to curse when in sudden pain
reinforces what scientists have since proven
what we already knew:

Whenever a match flame touches your finger,
or you strike your thumb with a hammer,
or when you are at Junior Camp 2

as you are helping a camper make a lower bunk bed
you bump your head like I did on the upper bunk bed,
expressing aloud a swear, a curse, an expletive
actually, sincerely, & definitely
eases your pain.

*(Swearing Is Good for You: The Amazing Science of Bad Language
by Emma Byrne. © 2017 Norton & Company)*

Seen in this light, curses may have their good sides, their side benefits, their usefulness.

Curses may serve to enable us to express aloud an inner anger
or sudden pain or point of frustration
when a milder word just won't do, won't suffice, won't communicate
what needs to be released.

Whenever one of us gets cancer or HIV, ALS or dementia, or whatever,
caregivers and survivors and the walking wounded
appreciate the sentiment when a follower of God utters an expletive.

"Damn cancer."

We understand.

We relate.

Sometimes the only words are, well, not in the Holy Bible.

We are Called to Holiness.

I grew up in a multicultural community in NYC,
one filled with people from all walks of life,
much like Atlanta has been for our children.

Betty and I raised our kids in Atlanta public schools
that boasted children from 48 different nations and ethnicities and faith
walks.

Their parents--our neighbors--work at the CDC, practice medicine at Emory,
own a laundry in Decatur, repair roofs, are entrepreneurs *par excellence*.

I like to think that based on this international exposure and a solid church home,
our children are now amazing adults.

Such a broad intro to life has served them well.

They've learned to be comfortable in a multicultural environment,
learned how to make friends with someone based
"not on the color of their skin but

by

the content of their character." (MLK, Jr.)

A good guess is they picked up some slang
and off-color language along the way, as well.

When I was growing up, I learned Spanish phrases on the streets of NYC
long before I my middle school teacher taught me formal Spanish.

Even though I was a preacher's kid,
the first Spanish words my friends taught me were the bad ones.

I recall a friend exclaiming a curse in Spanish, and another friend scolded him.

"Don't curse in front of Jamie. Don't you know his father owns the Church?"

By the time I was in fourth grade

I'd learned to curse in Yiddish

and how to play the Dozens and snap on "Yo' Mama."

You better believe this preacher's kid knew better

than to use such language at home or in church.
Hoo boy.
Not good.
Cursing at home
and at church
had consequences.
Around that time, while my mother was cooking dinner,
I dared to ask what was wrong with cursing, in general.
Why were bad words heard every day on the street,
but not allowed in church or in our home.
Why exactly was cursing forbidden by her and Dad?
She paused what she was doing; she took me seriously.
"Cursing can lead to fighting," she said.
*"Curse words can be used to hurt people.
They can be disrespectful.
And that isn't who we are."*

My friends, you and I know what we are: **We are Called to Holiness**

Jesus was challenged many times over the question of holiness.
We see in the Book of Matthew (15: 1-20)
that the Pharisees approach Jesus in front of his disciples and a crowd.
The Pharisees confronted Him.
Then Pharisees and scribes...from Jerusalem [came to Jesus] and said,
*"Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?
For they do not wash their hands before they eat."*
They were referencing the practice of ritual washing handed down over generations.
Jews practiced ritual washing and ritual cleanliness.
The practice of washing hands and arms up to the elbow had religious significance.
In the book of Exodus (30:17-21), we read that
"priests are instructed to wash their hands and feet
as part of the ritual purification for ministering in the tabernacle."
In Jesus' time, "the Pharisees, a lay movement
alienated from the Temple priestly establishment,
adapted this priestly practice [of washing their hands and feet]
as part of their conviction that Israel was a 'kingdom of
priests.'"

(The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. VIII, Page
332)

In front of the crowds, in front of his disciples,
the Pharisees sought to trap and trick Jesus of Nazareth.
You see, Jesus' followers were eating and serving one another and the community
without strictly adhering to long-established traditions for cleanliness.
Now, please don't go home and say,
*"Preacher said that Jesus said I don't have to wash my hands
before I eat or serve someone."*

The Center for Disease Control and common sense would not approve.

Jesus was up to the challenge laid down by the Pharisees.
In front of the crowd and His disciples, He said,
*"...For the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God.
You hypocrites!"*

Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:

*'This people honors me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me;
in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines.'"*

He boldly raised a question of His own:

What are religious rules and traditions aiming to produce, to process?

What's the most important thing?

It wasn't that Jesus sought to defy or deny or not dignify the Law of Moses;

rather He sought to fulfill the Law, to enhance it,

to show that the Law of Moses

is to be practiced in a context of love and grace.

The main point of the Law of Moses

was not the Law in and of itself;

the crux of God's Law is to build community and civility

where love and grace flourish.

What is the value of words if one's heart is far from the ways of God?

What is the point of worship if we teach human precepts instead of deep spirituality?

We are Called to Holiness.

Like fans at a tennis match, the crowds watched the give and take, the back and forth.

The Pharisees hoped to win the crowds to their point of view.

Jesus saw in the crowds each person's potential to be a follower of God's love.

"Then [Jesus] called the crowd to him again and said,

'Listen and understand:

it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person,

but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.'"

You see, Jesus grasped what the prophets before Him had proclaimed.

When it comes to rituals and religion, spirituality and daily practice,

what matters most is to answer God's call to holiness.

The Lord looks on the inner commitments of the heart, the way one speaks and acts.

Mercy is more important than an empty religious sacrifice, if your words are empty.

Sacrifice does have its value;

mercy, justice, charity make for a holy and whole world.

The words we say, the phrases we choose,

the songs we sing, the language we use

all have value.

Once released, they take on a life of their own.

And once released, there is no taking back.

Well, there is, but it takes a lot of love and forgiveness and grace.

Reminds me of the day a woman bought a parrot for a pet.

All the parrot did was treat her badly, biting when she picked it up,

insulting her, and, when company dropped in, using foul language

(pun intended).

One day she got so fed up with the parrot

that she opened the freezer, threw him in, and closed the door.

From inside, the parrot could be heard going on and on and on.

Then it got quiet.

She thought, *"Oh no, I killed it!"*

She opened the door, and the parrot just looked at her.
She picked it up.
Then the parrot said, *"I'm very sorry. I apologize for my bad behavior and bad language. I promise you from now on I will be a respectful, obedient parrot."*
"Well, okay," she said. *"Apology accepted."*
"Thank you," said the parrot. *"Can I ask you something?"*
"Yes. What?"
The parrot looked over at the freezer.
"What did the chicken do?"

We are Called to Holiness.

The Letter of James, written by "a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ," calls us to confess and address our choices in words which may harm and hurt.

The author writes, *"For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect. No one can tame the tongue. With it we bless the Lord...and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so."* (James 3: 2, 8-10)

Did this passage remind you of civility today?
Here we are, having a conversation about blessing and cursing,
and it's not a big leap to civility and incivility.

7 out of 10 Americans think we are less civil now
then we were 3 years ago.

"Over the past five years, the public relations firm Weber Shandwick has published "Civility in America," an annual report indexing American attitudes on politics, the Internet, and our collective spiritual health. With each passing year, the surveys show, our incivility problem worsens.

The evidence is everywhere:

road rage, professional basketball players caught cussing on camera, cable news pundits, personal friendships disintegrating over a Facebook post on Obamacare."

"...There should be nothing controversial about everyday kindness," [writes Hua Hsu];

civility as a kind of individual moral compass should remain a virtue."

("The Civility Wars" By Hua Hsu, The New Yorker, December 1, 2014.)

Civility is on the endangered species list.

Not only is cursing at others becoming more commonplace

-I got flipped off by another driver last month just two blocks from here --
being uncivil is threatening to become acceptable.

I used to believe we were making progress

in identifying offensive terms and language.

We were intentionally calling people to accountability and community.

Then such civility started being mocked as "political correctness,"

as if being nice and respectful was a bad thing.
Apparently if one redefines political correctness as a negative, as weak, as liberal,
says it often enough and loud enough with full conviction of righteousness,
some folks will start to believe it.

Growing tribalism in America and the world
has adversely affected our choices for words,
and vice versa.
Our language reflects affinity for our tribe rather than for God.

What do you think:
Are people thinking twice before putting someone down?
Are we counting to ten before we use offensive titles?
Are we bothering to listen to our neighbor's story
before labeling another human being as "illegal"?

Disciples of Christ: let's not get too proud of ourselves.
I heard a church member use this term in our parking lot,
calling a Latino in Atlanta an "illegal immigrant."
We are not far above the fray. Nor far away.
As the philosopher Pogo said, "*We have met the enemy, and he is us.*"

A good friend of our church was sitting in a coffee shop
when a total stranger accosted her,
telling her to go back to her country.

Damn racism.

Asma Elhuni happened to be wearing a ha jib.
Asma happens to be a practicing Muslim.
Dr. Elhuni is also happy to be an American,
earning a PhD at Georgia State.
She plans to benefit her country. Our country. Her God. Our God.
One God and Creator of us all,
for Christians, Jews and Muslims are all Children of Abraham.
We have also met the Savior, the Messiah, the Restorer of our Souls.
Christ is in us, with us, for us, leading us into wholeness.
And Christ is calling the crowd to Holiness.

The Goodin family has four adopted children,
and, as they point out on occasion,
[all of them were hatched] but none of them match.

Andy is three-quarter Cree, one quarter African-American.
Catherine is half Hispanic and half Caucasian.
Daniel is half Caucasian and half African-American.
Erica was born a Mexican national.

One day on the playground a child asked Andy,
"*If you are brother and sister, why are you black and she is white?*"
Andy, with all the wisdom of a four-year-old, answered,
[speaking the truth in love:]
"*Because that is the way God made us.*"

(Goodin, God Laughs, Too, Page
41)

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!