



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“SAY SOMETHING NICE”

Scripture Lesson: Genesis 6:9-22, 7:24, 8:14-19; Matthew 7:21-29

This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church, Charleston, SC, by Rev. James T. Rogers on Sunday, June 1, 2008.

Did any of you watch American Idol this past season? I don't watch the show very much, but I did watch a few of the episodes this year, and I am embarrassed to admit that for me, the most interesting part of the show is the early episodes when the judges make fun of the worst singers who audition. A contestant will wait in line for hours, get up the courage to sing a song in front of a panel of judges, and then listen to the reviews. More often than not, however, the judges rail the contestants, making fun of the way they sing, how they look, and the way they move around on the stage. Many times the snide remarks of the judges bring the contestants to tears as their dreams have been dashed or their personal talent (or lack of talent) has been made fun of. Did I mention that I am embarrassed to share that I enjoy this portion of the show? Why is it so easy to say mean things to other people?

I am sure that many of you have heard about the five year old in Florida who was voted out of his kindergarten class two weeks ago. The teacher encouraged each of the members of his class to say what they didn't like about him, and by a fourteen to two margin, the class voted him out.

Just this past month the youth group had their annual lock-in. We met at the church after dinner on a Friday night, sang a few Christian songs, looked for a biblical precedent for fellowship, prayed, and then spent the rest of the night playing games, eating pizza, and hanging out. We did in fact go to sleep by 3 am - that was part of our group covenant. Over and over that night, a few of the youth kept making fun of others, so I gathered the group together and told them about cold pricklies. Have you ever heard of cold pricklies? They happen when someone says something mean to another person, because saying something mean is like giving someone something that is cold and prickly. “You are stupid. I hate you. What a jerk.” So for the rest of the lock-in, when someone said a cold prickly, he had to say something nice to the person that he had been mean to; he had to give them a warm fuzzy. While some of the youth found it easy to say something mean, they found it much more difficult to say something nice.

Today is the second annual Say Something Nice Sunday. Last year the congregation across the street from us, the First Baptist Church, passed a resolution calling for the first Sunday in June to be observed as Say Something Nice Sunday. “Say Something Nice Sunday?” you might ask? Aren't Christians always supposed to say something nice? Well, yes. But First Baptist recognized that there was some real negative talk going on in the Charleston Christian community and among Christians nationwide. Religious groups were denouncing one another; denominations were on the verge of splitting. In response to all of this our Presbytery got involved last year, encouraging our local Presbyterian churches to participate in celebrating this Sunday.

So what does Say Something Nice Sunday involve? The official website explains, “Words are powerful. Words have the power to build or destroy. Words have the power to heal or wound. With

our words we have the power to build up a Christian community or to destroy it.”¹ This is a special day to say an encouraging word, to offer support, kindness, hope, and love. This Sunday is a time when Christians of all denominations are called to step back from strident discourse and not speak words of criticism about other Christians or denominations, but instead encourage one other by saying nice things. Sounds like a great idea to me!

And amazingly enough, there are people who are against, Say Something Nice Sunday. An editor of a Florida Baptist newspaper wrote an editorial this past week, expressing his concern over this special day. He writes, “I pray ‘Say Something Nice Sunday’ does not spread to Florida and the Southern Baptist Convention.”² Strong words from someone who believes that this day might lead Christians to promote a “Gospel-free Sunday.” A Baptist pastor wrote last year on his internet blog, “I will say with great feeling that the organizers of this campaign are the sad products of decades of effeminization within our culture. These bearded ladies in the pulpit are tired of the sound of the trumpet and the battles over right and wrong.”³ I couldn’t believe that there would be negative comments about Say Something Nice Sunday! Even the group that is encouraging people to speak positively to one another as an act of Christian unity is not free from negative remarks.

So why do we say such mean things to and about our family members, friends, acquaintances, coworkers, members of our church, members of other churches, people in our city and people around the world? Why are we so negative with others?

This certainly isn’t a new problem. Sin, brokenness, and violence have been around for some time now. From the story of Noah we read that the “The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, ‘I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.’”⁴ God was so hurt by the violence and evil on the earth that God chose to flood all of creation, which brought much death and destruction.

For me this is a really scary story. Many times we tend to make the Flood into a children’s story with happy pictures of Noah and his family and all of the animals safe in the ark. We jump to the hopeful happy ending of this story; the rainbow and the promise, but tend to neglect the pain and suffering and death that went along with this event. Even the lectionary reading for today cuts out many of the undesirable parts of this story. However, the recent cyclone and flooding in Myanmar remind us of the death and destruction that water can cause. And we certainly have not forgotten the flooding caused by the tsunami in that region just a few years ago or the flooding in New Orleans caused by the hurricanes. In light of these recent events and the news coverage, our minds can picture exactly what massive destruction caused by water looks like. The Noah story isn’t as nice and neat as we tend to present it to our children. Maybe this isn’t the best text for Say Something Nice Sunday.

But as much as the story reminds us about the tendency for humans to be evil and of our own brokenness, it tells us even more about God. Howard Wallace writes, “We must remember...that the flood story is ... a story about a God so deeply opposed to the violence generated within creation that

¹ Say Something Nice Sunday. [<http://www.fbcharleston.org/SSN-Web-Page.html>] May 28, 2008.

² Smith, James A., Sr. “Gospel-free Sunday?” *Florida Baptist Witness*. [<http://www.floridabaptistwitness.com/8904.article>] May 29, 2008.

³ Say Something Nice! [<http://hottubreligion.wordpress.com/2007/05/29/say-something-nicewwwsliceoflaodiceacom/>] May 29, 2008.

⁴ Genesis 6: 5-7, New Revised Standard Version

in bringing new life to the world, a new creation, a good deal of excision has to be made.”⁵ It is God’s opposition to the rampant evil and violence of humankind that leads God to flood the earth. And despite the widespread evil of humanity, God chooses to care for and preserve those who are faithful to him. All of humanity was not destroyed! Noah, his wife, their sons and wives were saved from the destruction.

And this is the same God who chooses to save us – even with our brokenness and sinfulness. This is the God who sent Jesus Christ to teach us, to preach, to heal, to perform signs and wonders and to be executed on a cross. And this is the God who raised Jesus from the dead, so that through him we might have new life, and life abundant.

So by saying something nice to other Christians, and dare I say even non-believers, are we choosing to neglect the Gospel? I think not! Remember Jesus’ words at the end of his Sermon on the Mount? He said, “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock.”⁶ What are these words of Jesus that we are to hear (not just listen to) and act on? They are his words from the Sermon on the Mount. They are his words calling us to love our neighbors – even our enemies. Jesus calls us to pray for even for those who persecute us. Jesus reminds us that we are not to judge others, or we too will be judged in the same manner. Building our houses on the rock of Jesus Christ involves us choosing to say an encouraging word, to offer support, kindness, hope, and love to others. Jesus’ command for us to love others at the very least calls for us to say nice things to other people.

Some might say that if we have to be nice, then we can’t speak the truth of the Gospel. And they would have to take that argument up with the Apostle Paul. Even he knew the importance of saying something nice when he preached. After being greatly distressed by the many idols in Athens, Paul met with the members of that community and said to them, “I see that in every way you are very religious.”⁷ Having seen the great amount of pagan worship in Athens, Paul could have said to them, “Guess what, you all are going to Hell,” but he didn’t. Instead he said something nice – and those with differing views chose to listen to his words about Jesus. Afterwards, “some scoffed; but others said, ‘We will hear you again about this.’ At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers.” Paul understood the value of saying something nice even as he spoke the truth. And through his nice words, people listened to him and became followers of Christ. This reminds me of an old American proverb that I remember hearing as a child, “You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.”

The story of the Flood reminds us that God will not tolerate evil and violence in the world, and that we are to rid ourselves of sin: anything that separates us from God and one another. And as people who have experienced God’s love so eloquently displayed in Jesus Christ, we have the responsibility to share that love with others. One such way of sharing that love is by saying something nice.

So I encourage you to participate in Say Something Nice Sunday. Here are some suggestions from a member of Wando Woods Baptist Church:⁸

⁵ Wallace, Howard. “Year A: Pentecost 3” [http://hwallace.unitingchurch.org.au/WebOTcomments/OrdinaryA/Pentecost3.htm] May 29, 2008.

⁶ Matthew 7:24-25, New Revised Standard Version

⁷ Acts 17:22b, New International Version

⁸ Rogers, Peggy, “Ideas to Celebrate in 2008” [http://www.fbcharleston.org/SSN%20Celebration.pdf] May 29, 2008.

- Adults, take the time to speak to young people – say a sincere word of encouragement and tell them how glad you are that they are in church. Compliment them on something that they are wearing, even if it is the earring in their nose!
- Young people, take time to speak to adults. Take a few minutes to shake hands or speak to an older member. Often they don't have children or grandchildren close by. Ask how they are feeling and really listen when they start telling you about their arthritis or gout.
- Seek out visitors or new people to speak to and make them feel very welcome.
- Invite a single person or a couple out to lunch after church and spend time getting to know them.
- Be a gracious guest if you go out to eat. The restaurant's employees are having to work on Sunday and the closest they may get to a sermon is you.
- Write a note to someone who needs some encouragement. Let them know that they have been prayed for and have been thought about during the week.

Saying something nice certainly shouldn't remain inside the walls of the church, but should extend to every facet of our lives. I challenge each of you to say something nice to at least one person today. Pay attention to their response.

A teacher in New York decided to honor each of her seniors in high school by telling them the difference each of them had made. She called each student to the front of the class and told each of them how they had made a difference to her and the class. Then she gave each of them a blue ribbon, imprinted with the gold letters, which read, "Who I Am Makes a Difference." Then the teacher gave each student three more ribbons and told them to give one to someone who had made a difference in their lives. One of the boys went to a junior executive in a nearby company, and honored him for helping him with his career planning. He gave the man a blue ribbon, pinned it on his shirt, and gave him two other ribbons to share. Later that day the junior executive went to see his boss, who had the reputation of being a grouchy fellow. He told him he deeply admired him for being a creative genius. He pinned a blue ribbon on his shirt, and he gave his boss an extra ribbon to share. That night the boss came home and sat down with his fourteen year old son. The father said, "The most incredible thing happened to me today. I was given a ribbon for being a creative genius by one of my employees. I was also given an extra ribbon to honor another person, and I want to honor you. My days are hectic and when I come home I don't pay a lot of attention to you. I yell at you for not getting good enough grades and your messy bedroom. I want you to know that who you are makes a difference in my life. You are a great kid and I love you!" The startled boy started to sob and sob, and he couldn't stop crying. His whole body shook. He looked up to his father and said through his tears, "Dad, earlier tonight I sat in my room and wrote a letter to you and Mom, explaining why I had taken my life, and I asked you to forgive me. I was going to commit suicide tonight after you were asleep. I just didn't think that you cared at all. The letter is upstairs. I don't think I will need it after all."⁹

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This summer the youth of First Scots are going on two mission trips: one to Jamaica and another to Chattanooga, Tennessee. We will be building homes for Jamaican families and doing home repair for widows in Chattanooga. We will even be leading a vacation Bible school for the kids in those

⁹ "Who I Am Makes a Difference" [<http://www.blueribbonmovie.com/>] May 31, 2008.

¹⁰ Say Something Nice Sunday. [<http://www.fbcharleston.org/SSN-Web-Page.html>] May 28, 2008.

places. I pray that everything we do on those trips will be saying something nice to those people that we meet. Namely, that God loves them so much and so do we!

Hear the good news! God worked through Noah to preserve the faithful and to end the violence and evil that had so corrupted the earth. God came to earth as Jesus Christ to teach us and through his death and resurrection redeemed humanity from its brokenness and sin. And God calls each of us to share the love of Jesus Christ with each other and the world. So, say something nice!