



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THE POWER OF THE TONGUE”

Scripture Lessons: Proverbs 12:18, 16:24, 18:21, 25:11; Mark 5:21-36

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, February 10, 2019
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Mark 5:21-36

When Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered round him; and he was by the lake. Then one of the leaders of the synagogue named Jairus came and, when he saw him, fell at his feet and begged him repeatedly, ‘My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well, and live.’ So he went with him.

And a large crowd followed him and pressed in on him. Now there was a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years. She had endured much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had; and she was no better, but rather grew worse. She had heard about Jesus, and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, for she said, ‘If I but touch his clothes, I will be made well.’ Immediately her hemorrhage stopped; and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. Immediately aware that power had gone forth from him, Jesus turned about in the crowd and said, ‘Who touched my clothes?’ And his disciples said to him, ‘You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, “Who touched me?”’ He looked all round to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling, fell down before him, and told him the whole truth. He said to her, ‘Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease.’

While he was still speaking, some people came from the leader’s house to say, ‘Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?’ But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the leader of the synagogue, ‘Do not fear, only believe.’

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

There is an old tale about a group of frogs who were hopping through the woods, when two of them fell into a deep pit. All of the other frogs gathered around the top of the pit to see what could be done to help. But alas, when they saw how deep the pit was, the rest of the group agreed that it was hopeless, and told the two frogs down below that they were as good as

dead. Unwilling to accept their terrible fate, the two frogs began to jump with all of their might. Some of the frogs shouted into the pit that it was useless -- that they should just give up.

Finally, one of the frogs took heed to that advice. Spent and disheartened, he quietly lay down at the bottom of the pit and resolved himself to die. The other frog, however, he continued to jump with every ounce of energy he had. His companions began anew, yelling for him to accept his fate, stop the pain, just die already!

The weary frog, however, jumped harder and higher and -- wonder of wonders -- he jumped so high that he sprang out of that pit. Amazed, the other frogs celebrated his miraculous freedom and then, gathering around him they asked, "Why did you continue jumping when we told you it was impossible?" Reading their lips, the astonished frog explained to them that he was deaf, and that when he saw their exuberant shouting up above, he just assumed they were cheering him on.

I share that tale with you because well – it demonstrates that words have incredible power; and while words managed to impact even the frog who didn't understand them -- ah, to the frog who understood those words rightly – words, mere words – they resulted in the loss of all hope.

I doubt that many of us here this morning have fully considered how it is that a series of letters that are organized together can literally transform someone else's life...for the better or for the worse. The truth is, our words bear the freight of both life and death. They can build up or they can tear down...they can encourage or they can bring about disillusionment. Words like, "I love you," they can be for a person a source of comfort long after those words were spoken; yet, just as enduring, if not much more so, are words like: "you'll never amount to anything," or "you're stupid," or "you're ugly." Such harshly spoken words...they can echo in someone's memory for as long as they live, and good, bad or indifferent, once we speak our words - they are out there - we can never take them back no matter how hard we try.

It is not unlike standing atop a dock and spreading a loved one's ashes over the water...letting the wind take them where it may. No amount of effort will get those ashes back in the urn again. And so it is with our words. For believe you me, they are by no means dead and lifeless as we may presume, no, the very words we choose to speak, they can take on a life of their own!

This is something that Martha Ann and I try to instill and emphasize with our children when it comes to emails, and Facebook, snapchat, and other forms of social media. We try to emphasize the importance of being exceedingly careful about what they communicate...to write in such a way that when somebody comes upon what they have written years later, and

have no sense of context, that don't know anything about the situation – that they could glean from that situation some measured words, some thoughtful words, perhaps words that are spoken kindly.

I think it is safe to say that there is no shortage of people in the world today who do not know how to hold their tongue, nor do they know anything about measuring their words. I was commiserating with a colleague just a while ago, and I was sharing with him one of the key ingredients missing in today's respectful dialogue, and that ingredient is "respect." Instead of offering words of challenge said with care, our words are often punitive and condescending.

In our readings from Proverbs we were told that "rash words are like sword thrusts," but "pleasant words are like honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body." In Proverbs 18:21 we read: "Death and life are in the power of the tongue...."

The Bible testifies to this dual reality in a variety of ways. For example, in Ephesians 4:29 we read: "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear." To put it another way, our words can be a blessing...or they can be a curse.

In Matthew chapter 12, beginning with verse 36, Jesus offers these sobering words: "I tell you, on the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

I am reminded of the story which comes to us from the Old Testament in 2 Kings. It is a story about the prophet Elisha and a man called Naaman. Naaman had traveled a great distance to be cured of his leprosy, but when he got to the entrance to Elisha's house, it was actually a messenger of Elisha's who met him and told him to go and bathe in the River Jordan. But Naaman was offended that Elisha had remained inside. The Bible tells us that Naaman had expected Elisha to come out, to stand before God and call upon the name of the Lord -- that he would have waved his hand over the spot and cured him. In other words, Naaman expected a dramatic display of power. And when he didn't get it, and as Naaman was about to start back home in a huff, it happened that a very unlikely candidate offered some very helpful and encouraging words. It was his servant.

Now, one might presume that a servant would have sided with his master and said something like: "Yea, Naaman, that so-called prophet didn't have the decency to come out and meet us. Let's go home. You have fought with leprosy for all these many days. You'll be fine." Ah, but that is not what the servant said at all. What Naaman's servant said was this: "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean?'"

Notice how those words were reasonable and disarming and altogether hopeful – they ended up being the very words that Naaman needed most to hear, because, upon hearing them, Naaman went down to the river and immersed himself seven times, just as the prophet Elisha had commanded, and, lo and behold, he was made clean!

Friends, we have been given a great responsibility to speak well and wisely - to build one another up...to not be so different from the virtuous woman about whom we are told in Proverbs 31: “she opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue” (Prov. 31:26). What’s more, we need to remember that this responsibility is given to us by the One true God, who, with but a word spoke this world into existence, and in this morning’s New Testament Lesson, we are given a glimpse at how the Word of God incarnate chooses to use his words.

The man’s name was Jarius, and he was a leader in the synagogue. He came to Jesus because his daughter was deathly ill. We are told that Jesus got up and followed him; however, his trip was slowed by a woman who touched the hem of his garment and was healed of her infirmity. The same could not be said, at least initially, of Jarius’ daughter, because while they were still traveling to Jarius’ home some messengers arrived and broke the news: “Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the teacher any further?” But listen again to what Jesus said to Jarius: “Do not fear, only believe.”

Oh, are those not the most wonderful words? For when Jesus says, “Do not fear, only believe,” not only does Jesus affirm the fact that fear and uncertainty are real, but he goes on to affirm that, in him, there is peace...that in him there is also grace to have faith. Jesus’ words do not distress - they do not destroy...they served to enhance life and they provided hope!

And so it is to be with the words we choose to speak! Whether we are on a mission trip to Haiti or serving meals at One80 Place, whether we are talking to someone face-to-face or via instant messenger, our words matter; and they can be spoken in ways that unite and build up and give hope, or they can be used to tear down and to destroy. Fear or faith – our words can carry either kind of cargo.

One of my favorite stories comes from Mary Ann Bird’s memoir entitled “The Whisper Test,” and it speaks to the power of words in her own life. She was born with multiple birth defects: deaf in one ear, a cleft palate. By her own admission a disfigured face, a crooked nose, and lopsided feet. As a child, Mary Ann suffered not only these physical impairments but also the emotional damage inflicted by other children. “Oh, Mary Ann,” her classmates would say, “what happened to your lip?” “I cut it on a piece of glass,” she would lie.

One of her worst experiences at school, she reported, was the day of the annual hearing test. The teacher would call each child to her desk, and the child would cover first one ear, and then the other. The teacher would whisper something to the child like “The sky is blue” or “You have new shoes.” This was “the whisper test” – if the teacher’s phrase was heard and repeated, the child passed the test. To avoid the humiliation of failure, Mary Ann always would cheat on the test, secretly cupping her hand over her one good ear so that she could still hear what the teacher whispered in the other.

One year Mary Ann was in the class of Miss Leonard, one of the most beloved teachers in the school and every student, including Mary Ann, wanted to be noticed by her. But then came the day of the dreaded hearing test. When her turn came, Mary Ann was called to the teacher’s desk. As Mary Ann cupped her hand over her good ear, Miss Leonard leaned forward to whisper. “I waited for those words,” Mary Ann writes, “[words] that God must have put into her mouth, those seven words that changed my life.” Miss Leonard did not say to Mary Ann, “The sky is blue” or “You have new shoes.” What she whispered was this: “I wish you were my little girl” (Long, Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian). As the Proverb declares: “a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver!”

Our words, dear friends, they can be a lovely and precious gift to those who hear them -- for in what we say there can be truth and there can be love - there can be for us and for the world a veritable banquet of grace on an eternal platter! So “let your speech always be gracious,” the Apostle Paul once said, “seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.”

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words we speak forever point to you, so that, by your grace, others may also come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing, may have life in his name. For Christ’s sake. Amen.

**The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.*