

## ***The Power of Words***

Jesus 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.*”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. Amen.*

[Psalm 19:14]

Three years ago in August 2014, I preached at Grace Church on this very text. The title of that sermon was “Sticks and Stones” – taken from an English language children’s rhyme “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never break me,” first reported to have appeared in the March 1862 edition of The Christian Reporter, an African Methodist Episcopal Church publication – as sage counsel intended to strengthen one’s self-esteem, self-confidence, and sense of self-worth by helping the hearer to understand that they should not allow themselves to be defined by another’s words or by what they think about us, but rather by what we know in our heart to be right and true.

My mother often reminded me of this saying when I would complain about being teased by my two older sisters. While I agreed then and now with her objective and understand what she was trying to accomplish, I knew then and understand now the profound power of words and thoughts. Jesus also understood and appreciated the profound power of thoughts, and the thoughts those words project from the heart. In Matthew 15:10-20, Jesus told the people, “Listen and understand: it is not what goes into your mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles... what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart...” with the power to defile or to bless.

Given the growing intensity of the temperature of the rhetoric these days in social media and the public square, Jesus’ message in this text is ever more relevant today.

Words are powerful. They can bring comfort, joy, blessing, and healing relief.

Of course, the Bible is packed full with words of comfort, joy, blessing, and healing relief. St. Paul’s epistles each include this comforting salutatory blessing: “*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,*” or words to that effect – bidding the reader to continue to read, explore, and contemplate Paul’s letters, even when the message conveys tough love that may be hard to hear. Matthew 11:28-30 contains those very well-known comfortable words that some have described as *chicken soup for the soul*: “*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.*” Then there is my absolute favorite – the 23 Psalm – special

and comforting to me not only because of its words of comfort, but because my Grandmother and I prayed this Psalm together on a regular basis and it was the first passage from the Bible that I learned by heart.

Prayers are among the most powerful words – with the power to heal, transform, and restore. I pray for those on my prayer list daily and I have been the beneficiary of intercessory prayer. Most recently, in the middle of June I sprained my ankle and my foot was swollen and sore, and I had been wearing a boot. A week later a friend visited me and took a moment to lay her hands on my foot pray for me before she left. In about ten minutes, the pain had noticeably subsided and the swelling had diminished to the point that I could easily put a shoe on my injured foot. Now that’s what I call the power of prayer.

In a few minutes, with more powerful words, Father Malm will absolve us of our sins, bless us, and cause bread and wine to become the body and blood of our Lord.

As I was praying and meditating about today’s sermon and the power of words, I was again reminded of a beautiful clock I saw when Halina and I visited the Moravian Pottery and Tile Works display at Mercer Castle’s 2002 Annual Tile Festival in Doylestown, Pennsylvania. Among the many splendid craft works of art, was a ceramic clock. This clock caught my eye, in part, because I love antique and unusual clocks. But, apart from the artistic design and workmanship, the message inscribed on the clock was particularly poignant – especially given the fighting, violence and unrest at the time in the Middle East, in Afghanistan, between neighboring India and Pakistan, and even Philadelphia, the so-called City of Brotherly Love where Halina and I lived at that time. For me, then and now, the clock’s message seems to take on even more importance, in a world where people seem to be resisting Jesus’ message “to love our neighbor as ourselves” with every fiber of their being.

In the center of the clock face, inscribed in tile, were the words “***Repair the World.***” And the prescription – as simple and yet as nearly inscrutable as Jesus’ own message – marking each of the clock’s twelve ordinals, were the words: *Justice, Devotion, Tolerance, Service, Peace, Compassion, Community, Charity, Generosity, Mercy, Respect* and *Love*. What a wonderful world this would be if the whole world could live by these admonitions.

“Sticks and stones can break our bones,” but, despite what many of us may have been told as children, **words** as well as actions can always hurt us. We are all connected, one to another. And, the notion that what we do has no impact on our neighbors is pure folly.

Words can hurt and be weaponized as instruments of destruction: To cause pain, invoke curses, and cause hurt and injury – sowing seeds of discord and enmity between and among individuals and our neighbors. Most distressing to me are the words in social media and the public square that seem to have aroused deeply-rooted hatred, prejudice, bigotry, and intolerance – empowering some to openly proclaim these

feelings and advocate these philosophies in a manner that would have been unthinkable a few years ago.

In a war of words, some say: *fight fire with fire* and if someone hits you, hit them back harder. But this is not what our Lord taught us to do. No, Jesus teaches us about love, compassion, and forgiveness. In Matthew 5:38-40, Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, ‘Do not resist an evildoer.’ But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well.”

Jesus did not subscribe to the philosophy of fighting fire with fire. Jesus taught and practiced forgiveness. In Matthew 18:21-22, Peter asked Jesus how often he should forgive a member of the church who sinned against him. Peter asked if seven times was sufficient. Jesus said to him “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times,” by which Jesus meant an infinite number of times, since forgiveness is beyond calculating. And, as William reminded us last week, Jesus distilled the many laws in the Torah into the two which are the most important: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Although fighting fire with fire is not the appropriate response, neither is silent acquiescence. The appropriate response is the kind of peaceful, non-violent witness to what we believe in the manner advocated and practiced by the late Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. I was so heartened to learn that our Bishops invited the clergy of our diocese to join with them in solidarity with the Charlottesville Clergy Collective on August 12, 2017 in Charlottesville, Virginia in opposition to the so-called "Unite the Right" rally – an event being supported by numerous white supremacist organizations. In their letter to the clergy of our diocese, our Bishops noted that “such groups have now twice targeted Charlottesville, citing the city's decision to remove a statue of Robert E. Lee and change the name of Lee Park to Emancipation Park.”

Our Bishops – clearly understanding what is at stake and why we, as people of God, cannot stay silent – invited the clergy of our diocese to stand together with other clergy and leaders from across the United States, “in non-confrontational and prayerful opposition to the rally” in order to “bear visible witness to the entirety of the beloved community in which people of all races are equal.”

And, in their appeal for participation by our diocese’s clergy, our Bishops called out the problem for what it is: “racially motivated violence [that] continues to plague our country” and described the "Unite the Right" rally as “an event being supported by numerous white supremacist organizations.”

Our Bishops also understand the role and necessity of reconciliation in mending and healing our broken world, reminding the clergy of our diocese that “[y]our voice is needed! As people who have been reconciled to God through Christ, we have been

entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation [2 Corinthians 5:18-19],” and declaring that “the Church cannot remain silent in the face of those who seek to foment division.”

Racism, bigotry, prejudice, and intolerance are not new. It is just that those who harbor these attitudes and beliefs now feel empowered and emboldened to express these hateful and repugnant ideas openly and in public. There is a lot of work to do to heal our broken world.

As our Bishops wrote in an August 14, 2017 letter posted on our diocese’s Web site: “as followers of Jesus Christ, we are admonished to heed God’s call to love our neighbors through prayer, through speaking out, and through other concrete action for the sake of all, particularly the poor, the oppressed, the judged, the demonized.” Our Bishops also invited us to join them in taking concrete action to include: being clear about the issues and being open to making appropriate distinctions, getting involved in the political process, creating conversation groups with people from different backgrounds and different political perspectives, praying, doing a moral inventory of one’s self, and speaking out against white supremacy. I urge you to visit our diocese’s Web site and read our Bishop’s letter in its entirety.

So, my friends, as I said when I preached on this same text in August of 2014, in our interactions with others, we should remember the power of words. The late Dr. Maya Angelou once said, “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” With that in mind and given the power of words – words from the heart – with the power to soothe and to comfort, to hurt and to injure, to create or destroy, if I might be so bold as to edit words of Psalm 19:14: “May the words of **our mouths** and the meditations of **our hearts** be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, **our** strength and **our** redeemer.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.