

Acceptable Words

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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Psalm 19

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.

James 3:1-10

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ²For 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. ³If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. ⁴Or 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. ⁵So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! ⁶And 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. ⁷For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, ⁸but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. ⁹With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.

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

These words are commonly lifted from Psalm 19 and used as a pastor's prayer before a sermon, but the Psalmist spoke for all people of faith when asking God to find our words acceptable. You do not have to look very far, or listen too carefully, these days to recognize that we live in a time when people have ceased to worry about "acceptable" speech. We are subject to the deafening noise of an endless stream of words from television, radio, Twitter, the internet; amid all the words that come our way, you could easily argue we still suffer the absence of meaningful words. Words have become cheap things, weasely things that are far too often used to distort, to conceal, to deceive, to hurt and destroy.

This past week I drove down to Richmond for a Board of Trustees meeting at Union Presbyterian Seminary. Driving around Washington, D.C. I looked over toward the Washington Monument and the Capital building, and I actually saw Marine One flying toward Andrews Air Force Base in that unmistakable threesome of helicopters that travel together when the President is onboard.

I thought about the words that are being hurled around Washington, words that we also sometimes hurl toward our neighbors as we take our political positions and pit ourselves against each other. I remembered something Wendell Berry said about the two epidemic illnesses of our time. He observed that the disintegration of communities and the disintegration of persons are closely related to the disintegration of language. "My impression," Wendell Berry wrote, "is that we have seen a gradual increase in language that is either meaningless or destructive of meaning."¹ Marilyn McEntyre put it this way in her book, *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*, "the moral implications of

¹ Berry quoted by Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*, p. 7.

careless stewardship of language has dulled our conscience...” and has the power to destroy human community.²

Both of our scripture readings this morning remind us that as people of faith, we are called to be attentive to the language we use. Words make worlds. The language we use shapes how we think and affects how we treat other people. Our experience today may show that words simply cannot be trusted; but words have to be trusted. When it comes to expressing the most important things in life the primary tool we are given is speech: *I love you. I forgive you. Thank you. Welcome to our community. I am sorry.*

The vows we take are made with words – in marriage: *in joy and in sorrow; in sickness and in health; as long as we both shall live.* At baptism: *We promise to live the Christian faith and teach that faith to our child.* Words compose essential promises, and promises give meaning to relationships, and relationships build up community.

The theologian, Jacques Ellul, attached not only the vows we make, but our everyday speech to God. He wrote: “Because God speaks, when a person speaks a mysterious power is attached to what he or she says. Every human word is called on, more or less clearly, to express the Word of God, and there is a misuse of power, an abuse of words when this is not the case. The importance of the human word becomes evident when we consider that a person speaking is God’s witness.”³

Whatever happened to the lessons we were taught about how to use – acceptable words? I am probably not the only parent in this room who caught myself saying to my growing children, “If I had said that when I was your age I would have had my mouth washed out with

² Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies*, p. 19ff.

³ Ellul quoted by Jill Duffield in “Taming the Tongue,” preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greensboro, NC, 9/22/19.

soap.” That never happened... but the threat always hovered. How we use, or misuse, respect or disregard words is not just a cultural issue; it is a profoundly important theological concern. When God communicates with the human family it is, more often than not, through speech. “Let there be” God said on the first day of creation, and there was... Created in the image and likeness of God, we human beings are most like God in that we are given the ability to speak.

Human language is intended to create a sense of community with God and one another, and from a biblical perspective, the proper use of language is not an altogether new issue. The third chapter of the Letter of James uncovers the incredible difficulty of taming the tongue. It may seem a trivial matter, James claims, but undisciplined speech poses a constant threat to the faithfulness of God’s people. James compares the tongue to a bit in a horse’s mouth, and to a rudder of a ship. A horse without a bridle and a rudderless ship are bound for disaster. James says the tongue is also like a spark which can set the whole woods on fire. Like a bridle or a rudder or a spark, the tongue accomplishes far more than its size would seem for it to be possible.

We can tame every beast of the earth, James writes to the early church, but not the tongue. Beware! James cautions. Especially those who presume to teach the faith, and James is not just talking about Sunday School teachers here but about disciples of Jesus Christ and all of us are included in this admonition. It is interesting how James finishes this little portion of the letter. He acknowledges the same tongue that blesses the Lord can curse others – and that is not appropriate. Because all others are made in the image of God, they are, therefore, due similar respect.

My friend and Editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook*, Jill Duffield, draws us to this power of speech when she says: “What comes out of our mouths through our fingers in type – has the power to alter the trajectory of our relationships, our communities, our congregations and our world.

We have been given the power to build up or destroy, to create a world that reflects the character of our God or that wallows in iniquity, division, rancor and evil. The very state of our life together is at stake... Because speech moves humanity to participate in acts of abhorrent hate, or to be inspired to make the Kingdom of God visible, tangible, unquestionably present not just to us, but to and for everyone.”⁴

To ponder these Old and New Testament texts today invites us to think about the importance of using words “acceptable to God” for the building up of human community, rather than tearing others down. It is a counter-cultural endeavor, to be sure. But it is nonetheless part of our Christian calling to use care when we speak. We all know the power of the human tongue.

We have heard hurtful words shot across the dinner table that can never be taken back. We have experienced that awful, irretrievable word said in passing, or in rage, or in thoughtless haste, and how it can gnaw on a person’s psyche for a lifetime. We can sense that when something serious is said under the guise of kidding around – it is no joking matter, because many truths are said in jest.

What we say is capable of good and evil, of blessing and curse; and childhood rhymes aside, a word can cause more damage than hurling a thousand sticks and stones. So amid the dangerous torrent of words that echo around us, here is the good news. The biblical remedy for using unacceptable words is fairly simple: the reverence we should direct toward God influences how we treat one another. This is the essence of Christian worship – the prayer and thanksgiving and praise we bring before God shapes how we treat one another. You can decide, James says, how to use your words, but in the Christian community what we say matters.

⁴ Jill Duffield, “Taming the Tongue,” preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greensboro, NC, 9/22/19.

So, in our time, when lies are accepted as truth, and words are hurled against people with whom we disagree, and language is used to divide rather than to build up human community, let the Church – the people of God – practice acceptable speech.

Tom Long tells the story of finding himself at a dinner party some years ago where one of the guests was a prominent church leader in the Soviet Union, before the Iron Curtain collapsed. Surrounded by American Christians who were interested in how the church weathered the Soviet era, this guest spoke encouragingly both about a vibrant faith that had survived despite being watched and under suspicion in a controlled society. “KGB-type agents infiltrated the church,” he said. “we would go to church meetings and know that some of the pastors present were really agents posing as clergy... They were listening to what we said, reporting everything. They were spies in our midst.” These spies tried to pose under cover, he said, “but of course we knew who they were.” “How did you know” he was asked, “who were the Christians and who were secret agents?” “We could tell,” he said, “there was something in their voice that gave them away.”⁵

There is always something in the human voice that gives us away, that discloses the essence of who we are. Is there something in your voice – the daily use of loving, forgiving, kind and generous words, perhaps... Is there something in your voice that is unmistakably Christian?

⁵ Tom Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, p. 157.