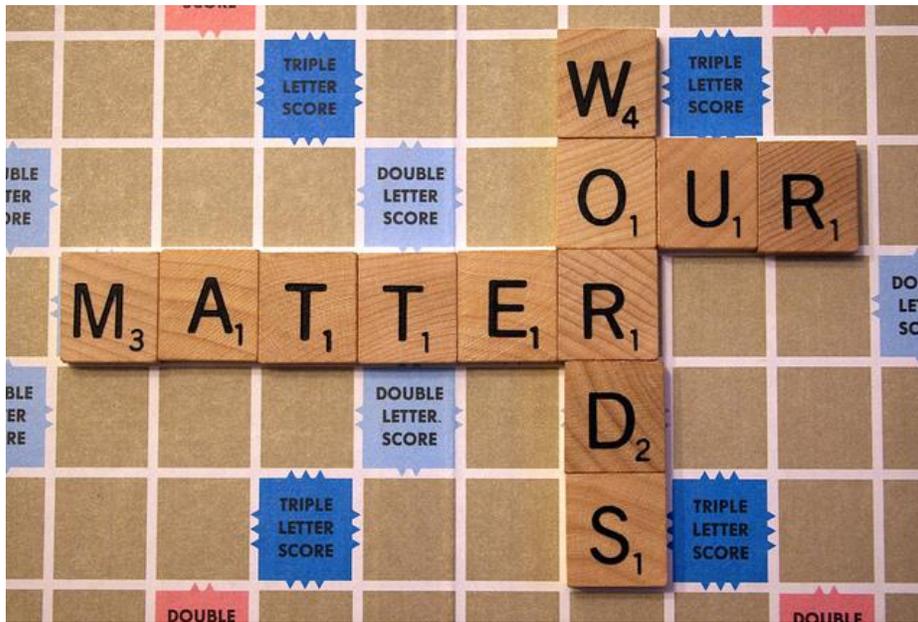


A Sermon by Rev. Joann H. Lee
August 9, 2015



Ephesians 4:25-5:2

So then, putting away falsehood, let all of us speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. Thieves must give up stealing; rather let them labor and work honestly with their own hands, so as to have something to share with the needy. 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. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a seal for the day of redemption. Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be

imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

OUR SON AUSTIN IS NOW A YEAR AND A HALF, AND HE'S LEARNING TO TALK. It's such a fun process to be a part of, to witness how we as human beings start using words to communicate. The most fascinating thing for me has been watching his brain work as he categorizes things into the words he knows.

For instance, one of the first words Austin learned was the word for dog which he calls, "woh woh". He'd point at our dogs and say, woh woh. But then we'd read books or go to the zoo, and he'd point at the cow, and the horse, and the cat, and the lion and call them all, "woh woh." Well, close but not exactly.

So, we taught him more words. He learned the Chinese word for horse, "ma". So then horses and zebras and bears, and all these bigger mammals became ma. But the smaller mammals still remained woh woh.

And this process keeps happening. As he learns more words, he re-categorizes them in his head, figuring out where they fit in his rather limited vocabulary. He keeps what he thinks are the most alike together, and re-shuffles the ones that don't quite seem to fit. But the process is bound by the words he knows.

And as I watch my child do this, I realize, this is what we do as humans. We take the information we receive from the world around us, and we group them into the words and categories that we already know. Those boxes may expand or change a little, but they can still be rather limited to our own understanding.

Our language helps us communicate and helps us understand and sort out our world, but it can also be limiting, forcing us to place new thoughts, ideas, and concepts into categories based on what we already know. Sometimes language can restrict our capacity to think and imagine outside the box.

It seems that we, as adults, are still doing what my toddler does, but now we just know a lot more words. Language itself is limited. And the English language is limited as well.

As humans who live in a global world, whether we speak another language or not, we probably know that different cultures, based on our lived realities, have different words to explain and understand those realities. As the old cliché goes, "Eskimos have a hundred different words for snow." Now, there is no one "Eskimo" language, and there have been some debates about this claim. But I think the reason people keep referring to it, regardless of facts, is because it hits on an underlying truth about the words we use: that our language is shaped by what we experience, and our experience is shaped by the words we know and use. So it makes sense to us that a people who experience snow for most of the year have many different words for describing that phenomenon.

Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf call this “the hypothesis of linguistic relativity” which basically says that the language we speak both affects and reflects our view of the world. This can sometimes be rather limiting, especially when it comes to matters of faith.

See faith, by definition, requires us to not know everything. Faith requires that certain things remain beyond our knowing and our grasp, beyond what our words can describe. God is bigger and more expansive than our language can capture. God is more than a “he” or a “she,” but we often rely on these pronouns to help us speak of God.

The way we speak of God and the way we speak of our faith matters. Our words matter. Because our words shape our understanding and our worldview. Words form pictures and convey meaning. Our words both affect and reflect our view of the world, our view of our faith, and our view of God.

An organization called the National Council of Churches recognized this and formed a Words Matter initiative where people of faith were encouraged to carefully consider the words we use in worship, in prayer, in song and in study. They say this on their website:

The Words Matter project is a conversation. Those who agree that Words Matter believe that the words we use shape our realities. We believe that real, personal and social justice is tied together with the language we use. We believe that the words we use can even reinforce the very systems of injustice we say we want to dismantle.

That places a lot on the potential power of words. Can words bring about justice? Perhaps. But words can certainly reinforce systems of injustice.

Systems of injustice like sexism, racism, and hetero-sexism are, in many ways, built into the English language and into the language of faith, and oftentimes we don't even examine them. Like when God is only referred to as He or as Father, how does that shape our understanding of a God who, according to the Bible, is also like a nursing mother?

The Words Matter Project asks us to consider what we say and why we say it.

There's a little brochure called “Well Chosen Words” created by the Presbyterian church which upholds the ideals of the Words Matter Project. In it are suggestions on how we can use inclusive language in reference to the people of God and expansive language in reference to God. It is an attempt to be more intentional and more just with the words we use. Because God as Father is certainly something that resonates with many of us, but it is not the only way God is spoken of in our scriptures. Might we expand the way we refer to God, so that God is known more fully and deeply.

Sometimes the use of certain words can exclude rather than welcome or invite. I remember being gently reminded that simply saying, “please rise” during worship can exclude those for whom that is not a possibility. We try, here at Calvary, to say “please rise in body or in spirit” or “please rise as you are able,” to acknowledge and to include those in our church family who have mobility challenges.

These may not be the huge steps towards the change and progress that we'd hoped for in society, and I certainly don't claim to know all the “right” words. But reading scripture, I do know that what we say and how we say it matters. It shapes us, and it shapes our community.

Paul knew this. Today's portion of Ephesians has a lot of instructions, a whole laundry list of how we should be as Christians. And a large chunk of it has to do with what we say and why we say it.

William Loader says, “...the ancient world was very aware of the potential destructivity of human communication. We need to be using our communication for good not for harm (4:29). Speech is powerful, and we should probably read these verses in Ephesians as all part of this theme of human communication. Compassion, generosity, and goodness need to become our way of life”, and I would add, they need to be our way of communicating.

Paul instructs the people to put away falsehood, slander, and wrath; to speak truth to neighbors, and the verse that particularly stood out to me this week: “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.”

If I were strictly to base what comes out of my mouth on this verse, I would probably speak a lot less. Imagine, if we asked ourselves each time we opened our mouths:

Will these words be useful for building up?
Will these words give grace to those who hear?

If all of us were committed to that, we may just have to start getting a lot more comfortable with silence. It's a hard standard to live up to. Just think for a moment of all the things we talk about on a daily basis. How much of our conversations are built on sarcasm and cynicism? How much of our conversations are borderline gossip guised in concern? How much of our conversations are tearing down other people or criticizing one another? How much of it is complaining or arguing or just outright mean sometimes?

What if we tried just for this upcoming week, to ask ourselves each time we are about to speak whether or not our words will be useful for building up? Whether or not our words will grace to those who hear?

I encourage you to try, just for one week, starting today, and to simply notice, are you speaking less? What do you choose to say? What do you decide not to say after all? And maybe make an honest assessment, how feasible is it in our culture and society to only speak words that are kind, merciful, grace-filled and uplifting? Where is it easiest? Where is it the most difficult: at home, at work, in the car as you sit in traffic?

Be mindful of your words this week.

When Paul wrote to the Ephesians, his goal was to encourage a group of diverse people from many different backgrounds and languages to become one united community, rooted in love. Perhaps, he wanted to teach them a new language altogether, a language not bound by any one culture, but the language Jesus embodies as the Word of God made flesh: the language of love.

“Live in love as Christ loved us,” Paul writes.

If the language we speak does indeed both affect and reflect our view of the world; what could a language of love be capable of doing? How might it transform our world?

Friends, maybe the only language you speak is English, but we can all become fluent in the language of love. It is the first, primordial language, and it is embedded in each of us.

It is the language that spoke light into emptiness and created this world. It is the language that was in the beginning with God and was God. It is the language we heard as we were born into this world and took our first breath.

This language transcends all differences and speaks to each one of us both personally and communally. This language is more than just the sum of its individual words, but it is the sentiment and purpose and great care and concern behind those words.

God spoke this language of love to us from the beginning of time. So let us try speaking this language to one another. May the lavish, abundant, grace-filled love of God be what is proclaimed here within the walls of Calvary Presbyterian Church but also out there far beyond the walls of this church. Love is to be proclaimed far and wide.

Our congregational response today is a song that we will sing together. Please remain seated and let the words wash over you. It is a lot of words, yes, we'll be singing all six verses. And none of them fully, adequately capture God.

But with the many names we bring for God, the one that upholds and encompasses us all is Love. So let us speak love in all you do. And may your words give grace to all who hear.

Amen.

Congregational Response: “Bring Many Names”

Bring many names, beautiful and good,
celebrate, in parable and story,
holiness in glory, living, loving God.
Hail and hosanna! Bring many names!

Strong mother God, working night and day,
planning all the wonders of creation,
setting each equation, genius at play:
Hail and hosanna, strong mother God!

Warm father God, hugging every child,
feeling all the strains of human living,
caring and forgiving till we're reconciled:
Hail and hosanna, warm father God!

Old, aching God, grey with endless care,
calmly piercing evil's new disguises,
glad of good surprises, wiser than despair:
Hail and hosanna, old aching God!

Young, growing God, eager, on the move,
saying no to falsehood and unkindness,
crying out for justice, giving all you have:
Hail and hosanna, young, growing God!

Great, living God, never fully known,
joyful darkness far beyond our seeing,
closer yet than breathing, everlasting home:
Hail and hosanna, great, living God!