



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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A Good Word
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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 (Ephesians 4:29-32).

When I was a child, grownups passed along bits of folk wisdom they thought we needed to hear, by way of preparing us for the challenges of life. Some of those challenges began on the playground at school, where mean girls and bullying boys would taunt other kids whenever they thought they could get away with it, for the childish pleasure of puffing themselves up by putting other people down.

Name-calling typically brought insults in retaliation. Among the boys, anyway, this often escalated to pushing and shoving, and sometimes to hitting with fists. When things got to that level, the whole gang wound up in the principal's office, where, as I recall, big wooden paddles were prominently displayed, and occasionally used, with a view to restoring peace, if not quite tranquility, to the playground.

In the midst of such conflicts, folk wisdom came in the form of a little rhyme: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me." The very fact that people thought they needed to say it suggested that the

rhyme was not entirely true. Of course, words can be enormously hurtful—in childhood, and in adulthood too.

We live in a time when ugly words fly all around us. LeBron James, one of the greatest basketball players of all time, said in an interview last week, on the occasion of his opening a new school for kids in Akron, that no matter how well known or how successful you are, there are still people in America who will call you the n-word. Still. In the twenty-first century.

Verbal assaults against particular groups, sometimes accompanied by physical violence, have been on the rise lately, in part because prominent people say inflammatory things for their own purposes. Apparently there are plenty of people who, given permission by some celebrity, will quickly cast off the veneer of civility and let their baser impulses fly. It seems as if whole groups of grownups are still stuck on the playground, calling each other names, as though they never grew up at all.

The ugliness is multiplied in our day by the rise of the internet and social media. People will say awful things at a distance that they would never say to another person face-to-face. We hear that the internet emboldens people, as if it evoked a kind of courage—but exactly the opposite is also true. It's not courage but cowardice that often gets unleashed at a safe distance. Anonymous attacks, on paper or social media, are not exactly profiles in courage. Hiding behind anonymity, or hurling insults from a distance, is not being bold. It's what kids on the playground would call being a chicken.

There's a great deal of fear in the air these days, too, and fear is another source of the anger and ugliness all

around us. People are seldom at their best when they act out of fear, and they're more easily manipulated by those who stoke their fears for some sort of personal gain.

The more thoughtful souls among us see this fear and anger and ugliness, and it's a source of great sadness to them, and more than a little anxiety about what lies ahead. I find myself having to remind young people, especially, that we as a nation have been here before. None of these things are altogether new, even if they get magnified by new forms of media.

My freshman year in high school ran from the fall of 1967 to the spring of 1968. It was a tumultuous time, as the older folks among us will remember. The Vietnam War was starting to look unwinnable, even with half a million soldiers, and the country was divided between those whose idea of patriotism meant pursuing victory at all costs and others whose patriotism wanted to keep their country from making a terrible mistake. President Johnson said he would not run again, partly because of the war, and he first came to that office when President Kennedy was assassinated a few years earlier.

In the spring of my freshman year, Martin Luther King Jr. was killed, and fear and anger and sadness were everywhere, while long decades of frustration erupted in riots and American cities literally burned with rage. A few months later, Bobby Kennedy, who shared the news of Dr. King's death with a crowd on the campaign trail, was gunned down himself on his way to what would likely have been a presidential nomination.

Lots of other things were going on, too, besides all the fear and anger around war and race. The United States and

the Soviet Union had massive nuclear arsenals, and threatened each other with what was officially called Mutually Assured Destruction, ironically and rather apocalyptically abbreviated as MAD.

People talked about a “Generation Gap” that grew up in the late Sixties between us Baby Boomers and our parents’ generation, but if there really was such a gap, I think it started a little earlier, when we were still in elementary school. Our teachers in the Mon Valley told us that if the Russians ever attacked Pittsburgh with nuclear weapons we would all pretty much be toast. That was by way of preparing us for the air raid drills in which, when the alarm sounded, we were to get up and walk calmly to the hallway, where we would sit on the floor and put our geography books over our heads, by way of defending ourselves against the nuclear attack. It occurred to a bunch of us ten-year-olds, sitting on the floor with books on our heads, that the grownups had not really thought this through—and that, I think, was the beginning of the Generation Gap.

However ugly some of our current conditions may be, we’ve been through challenging times before. The eldest among us remember hard times that began with the Great Depression, followed by World War II and the Korean War. Last year’s films *Dunkirk* and *The Darkest Hour* reminded us that in 1940 it was not at all clear whether Great Britain would even survive in the face of Nazi aggression. Someone has said that whoever happens to be winning at the moment always appears to be invincible, but we know from history that things can change dramatically. But things only change when people of wisdom and courage stand up to the purveyors of folly and fear, and say what needs to be said and do what needs to be done.

As it happens, my freshman year of high school was also the year my English teacher introduced me to high school debating. My teacher and debate coach quickly became one of my favorite people in the world; and she still is to this day, among the most influential people in my life.

High school debating was not so much about winning an argument in the ordinary sense as about learning how to think clearly, and build a case on a foundation of facts, and convey that case in a compelling way before judges who would evaluate not only what you said but how you said it. The higher up you went in debating, the sharper your opponents would be—which meant that you had to know the best arguments on all sides. How different is that from so many ordinary conversations, where like-minded people sit around conjuring up straw man arguments to misrepresent opponents who aren't there to speak for themselves?

Another thing about high school debate was that the topics always had a good deal of evidence and compelling arguments on both sides. If the topic was a no-brainer, one side would always win, and students would never have to think hard about the issues or look deeply into the facts. Debaters had to learn to see the strongest arguments on the other side, and the weakest on their own, because they could not get away with sloppy reasoning or shaky facts. Contrast all this with the echo chambers of today, where people make claims with little or no evidence, or cherry-pick facts to satisfy some audience that's more interested in confirming what they already believe than hearing other points of view, or considering the possibility that they might even be mistaken about some things.

Our theme this morning is all about words, and the power of words. We know that words can tear down, coming

from playground bullies or cruel adults; but words can build up, too, through the encouragement of parents and teachers and coaches and friends. Words can hurt, but they can also heal. Words can fill people with fear, but they can conjure up courage as well. Words can incite people to violence, or they can be used to bring about the things that make for peace.

Words are powerful. They're so powerful, in fact, that the Bible says God brought the whole world into being through words. Genesis says that on every day of creation God spoke a word, and what God said came to pass. God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God called forth earth and sea and sky, and they all came to be. God said, "Let the earth bring forth living things," and there was life.

Now that's a poetic account of creation, of course, and religious people cause unnecessary problems when they mistake theological claims for scientific ones. But still, one of the most interesting developments in modern science is the emerging understanding of information as a fundamental source of all that is—as fundamental as matter and energy. And what is information, after all, but a kind of logic, the logic behind creation itself?

That logic is reflected in the Greek word *Logos*, which appears in John's gospel as the Word of God—the Word through which God created the world, and the Word Christians believe took flesh in Jesus Christ. When we say that God was in Christ reconciling the world, that's another way of saying that the same Word through which God made the world is also at work to heal and redeem all of creation.

Those who trust the Word of God in that deep sense can have an even more profound understanding of the

power of words. Words are so important that Jesus himself says, “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.”

Words matter enormously, because words and the logic they reflect give shape to our lives. This means, among other things, that we need to be absolutely committed to the truth. Mark Twain is said to have claimed that a lie can run half-way around the world before the truth gets out of bed and puts on its shoes; and what was true in Twain’s time is all the more true in the age of the internet.

We who believe in the Word of God behind all creation need to be people of faith and hope and love, and reflect our belief in the way we use words. A word of faith can evoke trust in God and drive out faithlessness and falsehood. A word of hope can stir up courage and save souls from fear and frustration and the sense of futility that tempts them to acquiesce in evil. And a word of love is the most powerful word of all, because God is love, and God alone is powerful enough not only to create this world but to reconcile and redeem and save it.

Those of us who believe in the power of the Word need to use words wisely. Sometimes that means our words may be sharp, as a surgeon’s scalpel is sharp, but always with a view to healing in the end. More often, our words will be need to be softer and gentler, restoring calm in the midst of conflict, or bringing comfort and healing to those whom words have frightened or harmed.

And sometimes our words just need to say thanks, to all those elders and teachers and coaches who helped us to

grow, and strengthened us with their own good words along the way. This morning I have an extraordinary opportunity to say thanks myself, because my teacher and debate coach who taught me to use words well so long ago is here with us today. Thank you, Ruth, for all the good words you gave us.

Let me encourage everyone to thank those people who have shared a good word with you over the years. And while we're thanking other people, let's also give thanks to God, whose Word is always on the side of faith, hope, and love.



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