

"Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." Do you remember hearing this saying as a child? Do you remember wanting those words to be true? Do you also remember that despite saying that words will never hurt us, that words in fact did hurt us, and continue to hurt us in our lives? While all of us want to be strong and have a Teflon coating for the hurtful things that are said to us in our lives, the reality is that we are many times more like a sponge, and the things that are hurtful somehow soak in a lot deeper into our souls than the words which are given to us that are helpful.

Twenty years ago this was discovered in a study of newlyweds over the course of 10 years by two psychologists from Catholic University and the University of Denver. US News and World Report wrote that the psychologists found that "among couples who would ultimately stay together, 5 out of every 100 comments made about each other were putdowns. Among couples who would later split, 10 of every 100 comments were insults. That gap magnified over the following decade, until couples heading downhill were flinging five times as many cruel and invalidating comments at each other as happy couples." At the same time, the irony of this is that the joining of the two people to begin with was the result of words of love and commitment which helped to create this sacred bond.

Words do have an impact on our lives. They can destroy us. Yet words can also be used to create. When we think back to the creation story in Genesis 1, each day we hear the words, "And God said", followed by what was created. For example, on the first day of creation we hear in verse 3, "Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light." Therefore, according to the first creation story, God spoke, and the world came into being. As a result we find that words can be a very powerful thing.

Today in our Gospel lesson we hear the very beginning of John, and we are reminded of God's powerful word at the beginning of time, for it states: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people." There are so many wonderful nuggets in these first four verses of John, however I would like to observe two of them with you for a moment. The first is that the way in which we understand word has changed in this reading. For while these verses still refer to the creation story and talk about the Word of God, now this Word has gone from something that is understood as verbally creative, to someone who embodies the creative Word. The other interesting thing to note is that while the first day of creation deals with God creating light, here we find in John that Jesus as the Word was the light of all people.

So let us stop and think about what it might mean for us to think about Jesus as the Word of God embodied. Knowing that the Word is a creative force, what does Jesus create in our world and our lives? From our Gospel lesson we already know that all who receive him as the Word are made children of God, and we also hear that "grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Yet we also find through our Gospel that this Word of Jesus is a living Word, for as John states in verse 14, "the Word became flesh and lived among us". So how does this creative, living Word continue to speak to us today?

A cute story from the magazine *Bits and Pieces* captures an understanding of how the creative, living Word of Christ speaks to us not only in baptism, but every day of our lives. The story goes like this:

A young couple decided to start their own business. He was an engineer and she was an advertising copywriter. They wound up buying a small salmon cannery in Alaska. They soon discovered they had a problem.

Customers opening a can of their salmon discovered that the fish was gray. Sales sagged. Investigation revealed that the problem was a result of the way they processed the fish. "This is a technical problem," said the wife, "and you're an engineer. You have to find a way to fix this."

A month later, the husband announced that they would have to replace some machinery and make other changes. It was going to take at least 10 months to do the job and it was going to cost a lot of money. "We have to do something sooner than that," said the wife, "or we're going to go under." For the next two days she pondered the problem and came up with this solution: There was nothing wrong with the salmon--it tasted fine. The problem lay in its looks. So she changed the label on the can. In bold letters, right under the brand name, the labels thereafter announced, "The only salmon guaranteed not to turn pink in the can."

I like this story as an illustration of how to understand the creative, living Word of God because it shows how our understanding of the written Word can affect our perception of something that has not changed. The salmon itself was the same as before the labels announced that it was "the only salmon guaranteed not to turn pink in the can", yet these words spoke to the product anew, helping others to see it in a new light and become more receptive to something that they had been hesitant about before.

We as Lutherans believe that the Word that we find in the Bible continues to speak to us anew each and every day.

At every new member class, Pastor Bill and I distribute to each family unit a copy of Daniel Erlander's book, "Baptized We Live". It is a fun document for the cartoons that he uses to illustrate his points, however it is full of a lot of good substance on what we believe as Lutherans. In this book he talks about the Living Word, saying,

"We have affirmed that the Holy Spirit gives us the gift of seeing – God in the infant Jesus, God in Jesus dying on the cross, God in all creation, God in history, God in bread, wine, and water. We also teach that the same Holy Spirit bestows upon us the gift of hearing...The Living Word. ...

Truth is the Living Word which breaks into our lives, into our history, shattering old ways and creating NEW LIFE, NEW VALUES and NEW COMMITMENT. ... Living Word is the "address" that creates change.

Living Word is like the plea of an old fashioned young man on his knees asking a young woman to marry him. She realizes that her affirmative response to this 'address' will change the rest of her life.

When Jesus confronted the fishermen with the two words, "Follow me," they realized that an affirmative response to this 'address' would change the rest of their lives. This was Living Word!

...The climactic address of God's Living Word is the event of the life, teaching, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. When we hear the story, God breaks into our lives pleading... 'Give up your...games, false gods, illusions, vindications, excuses. Give up your dreams of finding wholeness and validation in your good works, your status, in what you own and consume, in your group or national identity, in your morality, in your self-fulfillment, in pleasure, in what you can do to change history.

Through Christ, God woos us and pleads with us, 'I love you. I forgive you. I want you. Trust me. Obey me. Enter the joy of my kingdom.' When we hear this call, we hear The Living Word.

...At Bethlehem, Jesus the Christ was held in a manger, a feedbox for animals. Luther taught that the Bible is like that manger because the Scriptures hold Christ, the Living Word, God's address to us. The manger was 'human'. If it were made of wood, no doubt some boards were crooked and some were bent. Nevertheless, it held the divine Word for the world. The Bible, likewise, is 'human'. Yet it is 'divine' because... the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, holds the Living Christ, who, as the Scriptures are read and proclaimed, lives as God's address to us."

This is precisely why it is important for us to understand Christ as the Living Word, and the Bible as the manger of the Living Word. We must always remember that just as Christ was not simply just a person, so the Bible is not simply another book that we can look at as a historical document or law book. Instead we must remember that as we encounter the Living Word it is an address that creates change. It speaks to us anew each time we read it in the Bible. It continues to nourish and grow our faith and it continues to show us grace and truth that we find in Christ.

This is the first Sunday in 2015. Whenever we begin a new year, so many people begin with a sigh of relief as they see it as a new beginning, and they look forward in hope to all that the new year might bring. It is fitting then today that we remember that in Christ the Word became flesh and lived among us, and this Living Word was the light of all people. I pray that in the coming year each of us, as well as our congregation, might continue to use our words to build up and not to tear down. I also pray that we might be able to listen for the address of the Living Word that creates change, not only in our own lives, but also in our church and our world, in order that we might continue to seek new ways to more faithfully share the grace and truth that we know in Jesus Christ. Amen.