

The Unchained Word

I've been aware as long as I can remember of the power of words. It will probably come as no surprise to anyone here that I started talking and reading at early ages and haven't slowed down much on either count ever since. I read "Hamlet" for the first time at six – mostly for the ghost story at that age – but I quickly became fascinated at the interplay of words, familiar and unfamiliar. I made my mother show me how to use a dictionary and I spent long hours puzzling over words that I discovered in Shakespeare and in the King James version of the Bible, adding those that seemed useful to my vocabulary.

I'm one of those that are fascinated by words – how they are spelled, how they sound, where they came from. Each new bit of information I discovered gave my imagination new scope for the flights of fancy and daydreams in which I often indulged as an often solitary child – an only child until I was eight and constantly on the move with my peripatetic parents until I was ten. I think it was initially my love for the written word that propelled me into the theatre. For me, that art form is, first and last, about words. While I appreciate talented mimes and other physical, visual forms of theatre and the dance, I always feel that the experience is somehow truncated without the power of words.

Words have the power to explain, to illuminate, to kindle new thoughts and new understandings in us. Of course words also have the power to obfuscate and hide the truth, to discourage inquiry and deflate curiosity, simply by overwhelming us with unneeded detail or prolixity. Words can build us up and words can tear us down. As an actor, I learned that the most innocuous words can become a weapon with the skillful use of intonation and intention and that what may appear brusque or even offensive on the page may be spoken and understood with the hope and tenderness of a caress.

As a prolific writer and preacher, the Apostle Paul understood the power of words, too. As a writer, he shows that he was a good student of the great Rabbi Gamaliel, for he writes with all the rhetorical acumen of one of the great teachers of Israel. As for his preaching, upon the apostle's first visit to Timothy's home town of Lystra the locals were so impressed with his speaking that they decided he must be Hermes, the messenger god, to Paul's great embarrassment.

But if Paul understood the power of words to persuade and convince, to bring people into a frame of mind where they could begin a relationship with the Living God, then he also understood the danger that words could represent. In a letter that many scholars think may have been his last, he warns Timothy, now a missionary of some repute himself, not to let those in his current congregation fall into a trap of words. "...warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening," he writes.

It is a warning we would do well to heed. Over the centuries, Christians have turned "wrangling over words" into excuses for hating each other, excommunicating each other, putting dissenters to death and even going to war over fine nuances of doctrine that ridiculously small to outsiders or even to most Christians. These theological quibblings seem much smaller and even disappear with the passage of time. I'm always mildly amused by Baptists who claim to be a part of the great tradition of Calvinism when I recall that those who attempted to practice believer's baptism in Calvin's Geneva were tried for heresy, found guilty, and, because they desired water so much,

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sentenced to drowning in the lake. On the other hand, I thank God that relations between Calvinists and Baptists, Anglicans and Catholics, and Eastern and Western branches of Christianity are all in some state of reconciliation after the bloody religious wars of centuries past. All because of words.

On the other hand, battles over the wording of expressions of faith still divide us. Most of us in this room have firsthand experience of the bitterness of Baptist divisions over words. Words like “without error” or “women preachers” were the flash point that drove some of us from our long-time homes in the Southern Baptist Convention, while words like “human sexuality” and “free association” led to the creation of our Evergreen Association of American Baptists out of the turmoil in several ABC regions. Here at Good Shepherd Baptist, we are committed to the “open sharing of a variety of viewpoints (including Biblical interpretations)... accepting (a) diversity of views.” This stance is an important part of our heritage as a congregation and I believe we must work to safeguard it. Because whether we are guilty of it or not and whether we like it or not, a great number of our unchurched neighbors believe Christians to be judgmental and cold, close-minded and small-hearted.

There is another way in which I believe we must heed Paul’s warning about wrangling over words as well. I believe we must remember the power of words, written and spoken. We must be careful how we speak to and listen to each other, how we write to each other and read each other’s writings. This may sound a little odd coming from me, a master of the too-quick and too-tart tongue. I assure you, I am in earnest. I hope that even as I rapidly approach my 50th birthday that I am not too old a dog to learn some new and beneficial tricks. I believe that I must continue to learn to take care in how I speak to others, considering before I speak both what I am to say and how I am to say it, and so I pledge to you. I also believe that I have work to do in how I hear what others say to me. Sometimes, I am guilty of taking offense at what is not meant to be offensive, of letting my feelings be hurt by a well-meaning but infelicitous choice of words. I suspect this is a nearly universal among us, bombarded as we are by words in our culture. To those with whom I have run afoul in the past due to my own flaws of speaking or hearing, I beg pardon. I hope that we can all help each other in the ongoing task of speaking and hearing “rightly.”

That is the word that Paul uses to Timothy to guide him into the right way of speaking the word of truth. Dirk Lange, Associate Professor of Worship at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, writes in his online commentary on this passage what he believes to be the key to understanding this word and I agree with him. “Rightly,” he says, “has little to do with conformity to doctrine. It has to do with conformity to Jesus Christ. Rightly speaking is remembering Jesus Christ.” If we remember Christ as we speak and as we listen, then we hear and speak with love. If we love each other as Jesus loves us, then our giving and receiving of ideas and perceptions should reflect this love. We should not hear each other guardedly or with suspicion, we should not speak from anger or pride, but all of our communications should be gentle and open-hearted, seeking the good of the other above the desire of self.

Above all, this should be our attitude when “rightly explaining the word of truth.” Remember, I take Paul’s advice to Timothy, even when it seems strictly aimed at Timothy as minister, as being applicable to us all. Our Baptist Movement has been devoted over the past 400 years to

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the truth that ALL Christians are called to minister to each other and to the world. We are called, my sisters and brothers, to preach the Gospel at all times, using words when necessary, as Francis of Assisi reminded his flock. Our words and deeds will always be interpreted by those around us as commentary on what we believe to be the truth. We must be careful, then, to be sure that we are offering the Gospel, the Good News of God's love and care for all, as the message in and under both word and deed. Our world has no need of more bad news – they have that and a plenty. But those who have not yet experienced the reality of God's love (and even some who have), whether they realize it or not, are eager for the word of the truth of that love for them. "I love to tell the story," says the old hymn, "for those who know it best are hungering and thirsting to hear it like the rest."

That word of truth, that old, old story of Jesus and his love, is the same utterance as the word of God which Paul affirmed as unchained. Despite the Roman attempts to shut the mouths of Paul and so many of his coworkers in the Gospel, Paul knew that nothing could stop the spread of God's word of love. Even though Paul himself was chained and awaiting execution, the word of God was spreading, traveling through Europe, where he and his companions had worked, through Asia as far as India with the Apostle Thomas, into Africa with the Ethiopian eunuch converted by Philip and with others. So it has remained today, despite active persecution or indifference, spreading into all corners of the world. The word of God, rather like the messianic figure of Aslan in the stories of C.S. Lewis, is on the loose!

The unchained word of God also serves to unchain and liberate those who take it to heart. The free-traveling love of God, freely given, brings freedom to each person in a way that nothing else can. In the power of the freedom and love of God, we cast off the chains of death and fear, for not even death can separate us from that love of God and the power of the Spirit casts out fear. The love of God empowers us to break the chains of habit and addiction, filling the empty spaces in our lives that we are too often tempted to fill with acquisition, consumption and obsession. The love of God frees us to become the whole, fully-realized persons God created us to be, removes the mental stumbling-blocks and yokes which restrain us from giving our all to life and unchains us from lowered expectations and inferior notions of self. In the word of God, we find the freedom to love, the freedom to serve and the freedom to be.

And what is this word of God? Can there be any doubt? Did you know that even the Qur'an recognizes Jesus the Christ as the word of God? As Christians, we can turn to the Gospel of John for a reminder: "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. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

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Paul recognized Jesus not only as the Word of God but also as Lord. In the opening of this passage, he writes to Timothy, “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David...” Rev. Bryan Findlayson writes, “Only on one other occasion, Rom.1:3, does Paul include such a phrase in the gospel. It is a messianic term defining Jesus as the anointed descendent of David who receives an everlasting kingdom and rules it in power. To a Gentile audience, Paul would normally use the title of "Lord".” We may find talk of kingdoms to be foreign to us today and even distasteful but we should remember that this is language that Jesus used, too. Of course, when Jesus spoke of the Kingdom, he was redefining the term as his audience understood it and we need to remember that, too. In the opinion of the Australian theologian William Loader, this is an echo “of Jesus’ own preferred language of the “kingdom of God”. It envisages... a community in which the cries of the poor have been heard and there is justice and peace.”

Paul writes to Timothy and across the centuries to us of Jesus as Word, Jesus as Lord, Jesus, because he is called the Christ, as the Messiah, the promised and anointed one. To remember Jesus as Messiah is to remember the one born to unchain the people of God, to set them free from bondage, and so once again we encounter the Unchained Word. Paul also reminds us that Jesus is the one raised from the dead. Again, we rejoice in the concept that death is not the final word, that we who have died with Christ have been and will be raised with him. We are the risen, the Easter people, who are granted the freedom to see life differently from others as we live it here on earth, to see life as a blessing, an adventure, a journey with a glorious end. And we are the ones who will rise again with Christ, to a new life we can only begin to imagine in the unmediated presence of God, our Loving Creator.

To remember Jesus as the one raised from the dead also means remembering him as the lamb slaughtered for the sake of the world, the one who suffered under Pontius Pilate and died. Paul knew that he had and would suffer, even unto death. Paul warned Timothy that he, too, would likely face suffering. So we also must be prepared to suffer for the truth of the Good News. We do not face lions in the arena or the other dreadful tortures meted out to Christians over the centuries by Nero and Domitian and a host of other Caesars, petty or great. But we do face disapproval, lack of understanding, social isolation and the like for our deeply held beliefs if we are true to them and these are also painful. But if we remember Jesus – Messiah, Lord, Word of God, Risen from the Dead – then our suffering becomes as nothing. If we receive the King of Glory, if we shout to the Lord the praises that are due him, if we lift high the Cross and proclaim Christ’s love to all within reach of our voice, then victory over the trials of the world is truly ours. If we are willing to follow Jesus with all that is in us, wherever he may lead us, then we, too, will be truly unchained. This is the ultimate power of the mightiest word of all, the unchained Word, the Word that created all and the Word that comes gently to live in our hearts. For the unchained Word, thanks be to God.