

The Fifth Sunday after Epiphany  
February 10, 2019  
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*The Power of Our Words*

We are bombarded with words these days. Texts, tweets, emails and posts. Our words spill out effortlessly on social media. Everyone has an opinion or a response to someone else's opinion. Too quickly can we send that text without thinking about the consequences of what we've said. Constant 24/7 communication made more convenient than ever; maybe a little too convenient. Henri Nouwen, who wrote before the days of social media, manages to capture how overwhelmed we can feel amid the clamorous chatter: "Our society is full of words: on billboards, on television screens, in newspapers and books. Words whispered, shouted, and sung. Words that move, dance, and exhort. Words that say, 'Eat me, drink me, buy me, believe me, pay attention to me.' With so many words around us, we quickly say: 'Well, they're just words.'"

This week I've been reflecting on the power of our words and how we take them for granted. Their power to heal or harm, to build up or tear down, to comfort, invite or exclude. The most daunting task as your priest is in figuring out what words I'm going to share with you on Sunday morning, my own humble attempt to offer a glimpse of the grace found in the Good News of THE Word made flesh. Maybe that's why I am so appreciative when I hear words used well, ones shared from places of authenticity, compassion and gratitude. At the National Prayer Breakfast Presiding Bishop Curry spoke to a room of Congressmen and women and our President. His remarks were uncharacteristically brief. In those few minutes he reminded them that Jesus calls a divided community to come together through the way of love. No finger wagging or judgment. Instead, words of generous invitation. I'm so used to our public figures deflecting, dismissing and even blaming others that when I hear the opposite, I pay attention more closely. The Attorney General in VA could have taken the same path that his counterparts did. He chose another way. Not glossing over or justifying his actions as a young man, but truth-telling. Raw, honest and painful truth-telling. His words creating an opportunity for white people to face into the sin of racism and our complicity in it, known and unknown.

Closer to home, I received a letter this week from the principle of my daughter's school addressing an incident among middle schoolers who had used social media in irresponsible and potentially hurtful ways. In reading his words I was grateful for his thoughtful response to the situation; and appreciative that my daughter and her peers had other adults in their lives who were helping to teach them to be kind and

compassionate human beings in our complex world. Then, on Wednesday afternoon I picked up the phone; and on the other end was the voice of a woman who had heard about our food pantry on an Abington community Facebook page. Yes, there are wonderful things about how we communicate in this electronic age. She had come by earlier and was able to fill up enough bags with food to feed her family several good meals. She said she could find no one around the church to thank. So, she called to tell us how we had helped feed her family. This stranger didn't have to make such an effort. Often, we only know that people have stopped by when we see the empty shelves. But, it was important for her to express her gratitude. And her words were a tangible reminder that this small act of giving makes a difference in our community. Her unsolicited words of gratitude were a gift.

"Words have the power to create," Henri Nouwen continues. "When God speaks, God creates. When God says, 'Let there be light' (Genesis 1:3), there it is. For God, speaking and creating are the same." God speaks, and Moses leads the people of Israel out of bondage. The word of the Lord comes to the prophets and prompts them to call their people to repent and return to relationship with Yahweh. At Jesus' baptism a voice from heaven proclaims him God's beloved Son. God speaks through Jesus' life and death. The Word made flesh. In the calling of the fishermen God's creative, life-altering power continues to move God's people toward new and boundless horizons. The carpenter turned preacher invites Simon to go out into deeper waters with him. In response to this unbelievable, miraculous haul of fish, Peter falls to his knees and declares his unworthiness. "Do not be afraid," Jesus says to Simon Peter. Words we hear over three hundred times in Holy Scripture. In them, Peter is set free. "The reason for the call is not to say to Peter, 'Buck up, little buddy, you're not so bad,' but rather, 'Stop being afraid now. We have work to do.'" writes Mary Hinkle, in *Pilgrim Preaching*. Many believe that the net full of fish is the miracle of this story, but I disagree. The real miracle of this story is that the words of Jesus set Peter free to choose another path. They create new possibilities for Peter and the other fishermen. An invitation to participate in the life of abundance that Jesus has come to share with all. The call of the first disciples was a call to become partners with God in the restoration of our world. It is this same creative and life-altering power of the word which we need to reclaim amid all the negative and divisive voices arounds.

Mary Oliver, a favorite poet of mine, recalled in an interview that during her difficult childhood it was the words of poets that saved her. Her poems feel like prayers channeling the voice of one who is in tune with the deepest mysteries of life and faith. As those great poets who came before her, Oliver invites her readers to encounter with her the beauty of this world, to use words which connect us more deeply to one another and to the wellspring of our abundance.

*When it's over, I want to say all my life  
I was a bride married to amazement.  
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.  
When it's over, I don't want to wonder  
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.  
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,  
or full of argument.  
I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.*

*-From When Death Comes*

Jesus is calling you and me to follow him, not as visitors passing through this world, but as partners and co-creators with him, helping to set others free so that together we can experience life in its fullness. Amen.