

The Power of Words and the Longing For Something Better than Political Speech

Psalm 19

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This past Thursday, I felt as if something of a dark shroud had descended over our country. We have all seen it coming, things were bad before, but Thursday seemed to be the worst. At times I was moved to tears as I listened to the testimony being given before the Senate judiciary committee by Dr. Ford and Judge Kavanaugh. I felt overwhelming sadness for *both* of the Ford and Kavanaugh families. I felt despair for our political system. And I felt anger that two lives and two families were being torn to shreds.

I do not presume to tell you who I think you should believe. Regardless of who you believe, all must admit there was much raw emotion on display at that hearing. Both people were giving convincing personal testimony. Two stories were presented. One was true; the other was false. Either one person was lying or one person was deluded. Someone's testimony on Thursday was not trustworthy.

I make it a practice of not offering you sermons that try to persuade you of a political course of action. This is because I believe that you can be a good Democrat and be a good Christian, and you can be a good Republican and be a good Christian. I believe there are conservatives that know and follow Christ and there are liberals that know and follow Christ. And so the concerns I share with you this morning are not meant to drive you in some political direction. I believe that we can all agree that no matter what your party affiliation or political ideology, no matter whether you are pro-choice or pro-life, there is something terribly wrong with the way we are conducting the politics of our country. I want to urge you this morning to practice good intellectual hygiene. At a time when so many are uncritically following along with their party or ideology, I urge you to be different as the people of God who follow Jesus. I urge you to be thoughtful and prayerful about what is being done in the public arena.

Words matter, words have consequences – personal destruction – is not a loving Christian course of action – this is not how we are meant to follow Christ. So I want to speak this morning about words – the power of words and the credibility of words, from a Christian point of view. I struggled with this sermon, because I feel that something very impactful and significant happened in the history of our country this past Thursday. Though it is good for there to be conversation in our country around sexual harassment and sexual assault, Thursday did not seem to me to be a healthy way to have that conversation. And so, I didn't know how to speak about what happened, but I didn't know how I could NOT speak about it either.

Regardless of who you believe, don't you wish that things were different? Do you not wonder who you can trust? Whose words can you believe – not just with Ford and Kavanaugh, but in our world with politicians, presidents and senators, with business leaders, people in the entertainment industry, friends, family and colleagues you may know and sadly even priests in the Catholic Church – though ministers of all denominations may have moral failures? We live in a world of fake news and accusations of fake news. We live in a world driven by politics, ideology and agenda. And don't you wish, isn't there something within you that longs for, words of meaning, substance, and truthfulness – words that can be trusted and valued, words that bring hope and delight, rather than words of despair and destruction? If only we lived in that kind of world, where words did what they should do – convey the heart and character of the person speaking them, rather than be used as tools of manipulation and deception.

Words are very important for Christians, because we have a story – it is the story of a God who desired to reveal Himself to the creatures He had made – a God that desired to be known for who

He is – glorious in majesty but abounding in mercy and love. This God wanted to speak a word so definitive about who He is that He became one of us, lived our life, died our death to show us – to reveal to us – the goodness, righteousness and purity of His Being – He wanted to speak a word so clearly that He decided to embody the message, He became Word to us – as John, one of His closest friends writes of Jesus, and “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Jesus is the Word of God Who Himself came to reveal Himself and the heart of God, not manipulate or deceive.

Our readings this morning speak of the power of words. In the wilderness the Israelites used grumbling and complaining words. “Oh how great we had it back in Egypt in slavery – at least we had meat to eat!” And their words cause people to accuse and blame others – God and Moses are blamed for a monotonous meal plan – only manna to eat! Never mind the fact that God miraculously provided the manna to sustain them, and delivered them from oppression and slavery. “God has not given us anything ELSE to eat but this stupid, miraculous bread of heaven!” Their words in our OT reading this morning were words of grumbling that angered God.

And Jesus in the gospel reading speaks of those who would create stumbling blocks for others, speaking words that hinder them from coming to know God. Jesus doesn’t explicitly state it, but it is the logical extension of what he says – if your hand causes you to sin, caught it off. If your eye causes you to sin, gauge it out. So what if your tongue causes you to sin? One of the implications of the gospel is a warning to those who use “stumbling words” that is words that cause others to stumble.

Our other two readings, offer something more hopeful. James is telling us to use our words to pray and that words offered in prayer, become powerful words indeed. Words in prayer can bring healing to the sick, joy to the heart in worship, and forgiveness when we use our words to humbly confess our sins to God and to one another.

But Psalm 19 really stands out this morning. Psalm 19 speaks of God revealing Himself in creation in the verses we didn’t [read] {sing} this morning (verses 1-6), how the sun and the stars speak of the wonders of their Creator. Many find peace and the Presence of God when looking at the wonders of creation – a majestic mountain range, a vivid sunset, a dazzling night sky or the beauty of the sea. You can come to know God as Creator, a God of power, order and peace when you look at such wonders of creation – but the Psalmist says we must go further. To really know a person – we must not merely look at what they have accomplished and built, but we must hear them express themselves. You cannot know someone – you cannot have a relationship with someone...you cannot really know that someone loves and cares about you unless they tell you how they feel. We need the words to really fully understand and appreciate love. We need words for relationship.

And so, while creation does reveal the glory of God, we need God’s words to really know God’s heart. The Psalmist speaks using poetic and rapturous words to tell us of the wondrous words that God has spoken. “The Law of the Lord is perfect and revives the soul.” Look at the inspiring, uplifting effect of God’s words as the Psalmist speaks of them: rejoicing the heart, giving wisdom and enlightening the eyes. The Laws and statutes of the Lord are not given because God wants to control us with rules – they are spoken to give joy, inspiration, light and life! Our Creator, who designed us, knows how we will flourish and so He has revealed the Purity of His heart in His words to guide us in how to live that abundant and blessed life. And in the New Testament we have the words of the Son of God, Jesus Christ – the Word of God come into the world.

You may wonder is the Bible itself credible? There are many today who don't think so. We don't have time to go into the details right now – but PLEASE – talk to me if you want to understand this history. There is a clear historical line from the church councils that compiled which books would be in our New Testament, straight back to the Apostles themselves. Holy people of character, carefully, diligently sought to test the veracity and credibility of those who wrote these books of our New Testament, and these were people of character, who were willing to die and be tortured just like Jesus was in order to share these words and tell the Christian story. The Bible contains the most widely attested, reliable words ever written. And in it we have what purports to be the very Word of God.

And that is just the thing we long for isn't it? A reliable word, a trustworthy word, a word that is good and true, life-giving and uplifting? Must we not agree with the Psalmist that such Divine words are more valuable than gold and great wealth? God's Word is the gold standard of communication. And in God's Word we have something more delightful than the most delicious food ever made, sweeter than honey.

The words of men and women may bring harm, manipulate, provoke, and destroy. There are grumbling words and stumbling words. The words of men and women may speak lies and deception. But in Christ, in the Scriptures, there is a beauty, a purity, an inspiring, joy-bringing hopefulness. Are there places in the Bible confusing and hard to understand? Of course – we should expect nothing less, if they are truly God's word to His creatures. Difficulties in the Bible suggest its reliability rather than disparage it.

So what can you do living as a person of faith in our world today, surrounded by people of unclean lips? Might I suggest three things from God's word in our readings this morning: 1. **Do Not Join In** – do not become part of the problem, watch your words and do not speak words that seek to manipulate or control others. Do not speak words that harm. Such words are not fit and proper for the people who are seeking to follow Christ.

2. **Speak the Gold Standard, the Sweet Delightful words of the Scriptures.** Let those words flow from your mouth and fill your thoughts. These are words that inspire, reviving the soul and enlightening the mind with the goodness rightness and purity of the God who created this world, the One who loves it. Hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest – memorize the Scriptures! This is a fundamental way to follow the prescription of Philippians 4 to think about the things that are honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, lovely, excellent and praiseworthy. Focus on God's words and fill your mind with those – to counteract the life-draining, despairing, and disheartening words you will hear in our world today. Focus on God's Word – Jesus the Word made flesh and God's Word the Bible. (1) Don't Join In. (2) Speak Scripture and

3. Use your words to **speak to God in prayer** – speak more regularly to God in prayer...talk to Him when you despair of the words of others around you and politicians in this world. Ask God about who is to be trusted and who is not. Speak to God when cheerful, in need, or when sick. God has gifted the human race with language so that we may communicate with one another but most of all so that we can communicate with our loving Heavenly Father – words grow relationships, let your words enrich and grow your relationship with God.

So in closing, you may be thinking all this talk about God's trustworthy, good and inspiring words – yeah that sounds great, but maybe it sounds too good to be true. And for those of you out there who might be thinking that I close with this:

It was the power of words and story that persuaded an entrenched atheist. He and his fellow Oxford professor would take long walks along the paths in the wood near Magdalene college. The atheist would protest and doubt the veracity of the Bible and the evidence for the existence of God. The atheist was dismayed that the world was such a troubled place. But the atheist loved literature and story. The atheist groused that the things he loved the most were not real. He loved the beauty he saw in story and fantasy. But the friend said that the longing for beauty suggested something. He said in effect, you would find it absurd that animals would have hunger if there was no such thing as food. Does not the hunger suggest that something such as food exists? Now consider your longing for the good, lovely, and beautiful you find in story and literature – is that not the same thing? Is it not absurd to think that humans would long for it if there is no Pure Love and Perfect Beauty? The very desire for it, suggests that there is something there. And afterward the friend, JRR Tolkien wrote a poem and sent it to the atheist, C.S. Lewis and shortly thereafter Lewis became a believer.

And so as we consider the hunger in ourselves this morning for a better world, for better public discourse, for words of lasting value, for words that inspire and uplift, for words that are true – perhaps, just perhaps it is the same thing. Perhaps we long for Good Words because that is precisely how our Creator designed us. Perhaps we were made for wholesome words, for communication, for relationship. Perhaps the more those words fill our thoughts and our minds, the better this world will become and the better people we will become.

With the Psalmist I pray this morning that the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts would be now – and always – acceptable in Your Sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. AMEN.