

The Power of the Word

John 1:1-5, Hebrews 4:12-16, Psalm 119 (Voices United 838 Part 2)

“Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me.” Remember that response we used to say to someone who had taunted us when we were young? We hated it when someone we wanted to impress or someone we wanted to like us or someone significant in our lives said words that damaged our feelings. We tried to cover up our emotional wounds by saying “You can’t hurt me with your words.” But deep down, if we were honest, we knew this wasn’t true. We could feel the destructive power of the word because it hurt to hear such a remark. We could feel the injury in our spirits. So we all know how the power of words can be personally damaging to us. And, of course, there is also the power in our words that can damage others in return.

Michelle admits to being caught in a nasty situation. While at a restaurant over lunch, Michelle and her co-worker, Sharon, stopped in the restroom to fix their makeup before returning to their jobs. Their small talk turned to the subject of someone who drove them crazy. Immediately Michelle launched into a two-minute diatribe about Beth, a mutual co-worker. As Michelle prepared to divulge more specifics, a stall door opened. Out walked Beth, red-faced and angry.

In a split second, what had seemed like a pressure-relief session turned into an awkward mess. Michelle and Beth stared at each other in embarrassed panic. Michelle knew she couldn't take her words back. In the instant their eyes met, Beth fled out the door. That afternoon, Beth didn't return to work and, the next day, Michelle heard through the grapevine that Beth had resigned. While other staff members openly cheered what seemed to be good news, Michelle felt miserable. She wished she would have talked to Beth instead of talking about her.

Although that situation happened five years ago, Michelle has never forgotten it. She tried to reach Beth several times by phone, then wrote her a letter of apology, but Beth never responded. Michelle says she learned her lesson about careless words -- the hard way. What's worse is that Michelle is a Christian and Beth, to her knowledge, is not. [Ramona Cramer Tucker, “Loose Lips,” *Christian Reader*, March/April 2002, pp.38-39]

Words can hurt! Most of us have experienced the truth of that statement. But the good news is there is *also* the power of words that can heal.

I resonate with the thoughts and feelings of fellow minister, Tim Brown, who tells a personal story about forgiveness in his life:

I was having lunch in McDonald's with my daughter and mother-in-law when a man with his wife and children sat down at a nearby table. [I immediately recognized him as] someone who had once badly hurt me. We faked pleasantries but I could feel my blood begin to boil at the thought of what he had done to me. I was also surprised about how much hurt I still felt.

As my family and I ... [were leaving] the restaurant, I overheard “my enemy” and his wife arguing because neither had any money to purchase the food they had ordered. Their three

kids were screaming for their Happy Meals. The couple was embarrassed. My first thought was “Praise God, there *is* justice in this world! He deserves every bit of embarrassment he's feeling. I'm so glad I got to see this.” [But] suddenly ... [I remembered] the [Scripture] I had read that morning:

“Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God [to work], for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord. On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.’” (Romans 12:17-20)

Tim Brown felt as if God were saying to him: *Here's your chance to be set free of your pain and overcome your hurt.* He knew he had a choice either to obey God's word or to bask in his bitterness. Somewhat reluctantly, he said, “I reached into my wallet, pulled out \$20 and gave it to this man who had been my enemy. ‘Have lunch on me,’ I said with tears in my eyes.”

There is a course of direction God has set out in Scripture for the power of the healing word to take hold in our lives. This route of healing involves several pathways. Listen again to what we heard earlier from Hebrews 4:12 and 13 but this time from *The Message Bible*:

“God means what [God] says. What [God] says goes. [God's] powerful Word is sharp as a surgeon's scalpel, cutting through everything, whether doubt or defence, laying us open to listen and obey. Nothing and no one is impervious to God's Word. We can't get away from it -- no matter what.”

1. **One pathway to experiencing the power of the word is to understand that the Bible was not given primarily to increase our intellectual knowledge but to transform -- to change -- our lives for good.**

Most of us are interested in learning more about life, about faith, about all kinds of things. So we read books and join book clubs. We may spend hours on the Internet Googling various subjects of interest. We join local museums, art galleries, libraries and we take courses to increase our knowledge of whatever is important to us. If we are interested in spiritual and religious matters, we will read all manner of spiritual books. But my educated hunch is that, for most people, the Bible is low on their list of significant books to digest. That is understandable if they are not involved in the church or do not call themselves followers of Jesus. But for those who are connected with Christ's church and say they are trying to follow the teachings of Jesus, I do not understand why reading the Christian Scriptures seems to be so low on their books-I-must-read list.

Actually that's not quite true. I think I do understand some possible reasons. For instance, I wonder if some people read the Bible to add to their knowledge of ancient history or excellent literature or superb story rather than to change their lives. I wonder if we have forgotten that God's Word is meant to communicate life-giving and healing love. I wonder if our response to God's Word would be different if we really understood how much God truly loves us and how the Scripture is God's way of opening up grace and love for us and for the whole of humanity.

In Hebrews 4, God's Word is described as being alive and active. People who regularly read the Scriptures – even ministers like Tim Brown – learn there is nothing stagnant or archaic in God's message for us. It possesses a diagnostic perception that picks up the inconsistencies in our words and actions. It is so sharp it can draw a line between the mental and the spiritual, like separating bones from marrow so to speak, and can discern all our inner emotions and drives and motivations. In fact, there is no outward behaviour we can engage in that will hide from God the real purpose and intent of our hearts. We may appear to be utterly sincere before our family, friends and everyone else but God knows – as we do ourselves -- if there is an ulterior motive. God's Word is like a two-edged sword, sharp as a surgeon's scalpel, discerning the twists and turns of the human mind and heart.

But God's Word, acting like a powerful scalpel, is meant for healing and not to harm. If anything is meant for the cutting room floor, it is the stuff that has already damaged and hurt us. It is the taunts, the derision, the rejection, the emotional wounds, the injured spirit and the anger and bitterness we are holding onto that festers inside us and we can't get rid of.

2. **The change God desires for us is meant for our good and not for our hurt. That's another pathway about the power of the word for us to understand.** *The Message Bible* puts it like this: “[God's] powerful Word is sharp as a surgeon's scalpel, cutting through everything, whether doubt or defence, laying us open to listen and obey.”

It was Eugene Peterson -- writer of *The Message Bible* -- who helped put being open to listening to God and to obeying God into perspective for me when he wrote about his enjoyment of long-distance running. He was in his mid-30s when he began to run and would compete in 10-kilometre races every few months. Then once a year he would participate in a marathon. He subscribed to three running magazines, which he read from cover to cover! Then he pulled a muscle and couldn't run for several months. He said those running magazines were all over the house but, strangely, he never opened one of them. However, the moment he resumed running, he started reading again. What Peterson said next was illuminating:

That's when I realized that my reading was an extension of something I was a part of. I was reading for companionship and affirmation of the experience of running. I learned a few things along the way, but mostly it was to deepen my world of running. If I wasn't running, there was nothing to deepen.

The parallel with reading Scripture is striking. If I am not living in active response to the living God, [then] reading about [God's] creation – [God's] salvation, [God's] holiness -- won't hold my interest for long. The most important question is not “What does this mean,” but “What can I obey?” Simple obedience [to God] will open up our lives to [understanding the biblical] text more quickly than any number of Bible studies, dictionaries, and concordances. [Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book* (William B. Eerdmans, 2006), pp. 70-71]

Let me come at this from another angle. When we find ourselves lacking in wisdom about the Bible, it is not because the Word of God has pages missing but because we have not really seen all there is on its pages. It is not some other book we need so much as better attention to the Scripture we have. It is not more knowledge we require but better vision to see what has already

been revealed in Jesus Christ. Or, as Jesus said, we need ears that hear and eyes that see!

So the writer of Hebrews tells us clearly about Jesus in verses 14 to 16 of Chapter 4. Listen again in *The Message Bible*:

“Now that we know what we have -- Jesus, this great High Priest with ready access to God -- let’s not let it slip through our fingers. We don’t have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. He’s been through weakness and testing, experienced it all -- all but the sin. So let’s walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help.”

3. **That leads into another pathway regarding the power of the word. It is the power of God’s Word that leads us to faith and keeps us in the faith.** Listen to what the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Christians in Rome from *The Message Bible*. (I think you know by now I like *The Message Bible*! The *meaning* of the passage is put in strikingly clear, contemporary words and images that make me take another look and take it to mind and heart.) Paul wrote:

“It’s the word of faith that welcomes God to go to work and set things right for us. This is the core of our preaching. Say the welcoming word to God – ‘Jesus is my Master’ -- embracing, body and soul, God’s work of doing in us what he did in raising Jesus from the dead. That’s it. You’re not ‘doing’ anything; you’re simply calling out to God, trusting him to do it for you. That’s salvation. With your whole being you embrace God setting things right, and then you say it, right out loud: “God has set everything right between him and me!” [Romans 10:8-10]

God’s Word is alive and engaging and life-giving and healing. And God has communicated God’s extravagant and gracious love to us through Jesus Christ who is the Living Word of God who became human and moved into our humanity. God doesn’t remain aloof from our human needs and concerns. In Jesus of Nazareth, God was in direct touch with our human reality -- but without the sin that is part of our human condition. That’s why we can confidently approach Jesus Christ who embodies God’s compassion for our human frailty and is more than willing and able to *help* us in our needs. That’s what we hear from Hebrews:

“[Jesus] has been through weakness and testing, experienced it all -- all but the sin. So let’s walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help.”

My friends, the power of the Word of God and the living Word of God in Jesus Christ is available to all.

May this be so for me and for you. Amen.

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