

Sermon: The Best Words
Text: I Corinthians 1:1-9
Date: January 19, 2020
MLK Sunday
Context: WWPC
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind . . .

I Cor. 1:4, 5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

You may recognize this declaration as the introduction to the Gospel of John. I find it so evocative as to be magisterial, so evocative as to be unforgettable.

So evocative as to make me wonder whether the committee that decided on the order in which the Gospels appear in the New Testament may have missed an opportunity.

Matthew, not John, is the first book of the New Testament. But how perfect would it be if the opening line of the New Testament echoed the opening line of the Old:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

I raise this question because I believe there is more in play here, more at stake here, than a beautiful, poetic parallel.

Together, these two unforgettable declarations speak to one of the most profound principles in the universe: Words matter. Words have power. There is something inherently divine about them.

For in the Genesis story, it was with words that God called the cosmos into being. Words were, in effect, the creative material out of which the universe itself was made.

And God said, let there be light and there was light. Even if you believe the scientific account of creation, and I hope you do, even if you just read Genesis as story, as theology, and I hope you do, this declaration speaks to the creative power of words.

On a more down to earth level, words set us apart from the animals. The ability to speak them, to use them, is an essential part of what makes us human, an essential part of what makes art and culture and science and religion and universities and churches possible.

There is something sacred about words, something even sort of magical about them.

I had a farm in Africa, at the foot of the Ngong Hills. Just like that, in the time it takes to read that one sentence, Isaac Dineson has transported all of us across the Atlantic, across the continent of Africa, and set us down at the foot of the Ngong Hills, just outside of Nairobi, Kenya.

Circling back to the biblical tradition, words were, and are, the primary tool the prophets used, and still use, to call the people of God back to being the people of God when they go astray. When they forget to welcome strangers. When they neglect the needs of the poor.

And of course, as the Word of God incarnate, Jesus stands at the peak of this epistemological, this communications, pyramid. He is the embodied expression of the message God wishes to convey to us, the Great Good News God wishes to and communicate to us: that God so loved the world, and everyone in it, that regardless of our race, our class, our nationality, we are all precocious in God's sight.

Words matter when God speaks them. Words matter when we speak them. They contain inherent power. They have a spark of divinity about them.

They can create entire worlds -- Middle Earth, Westeros, Narnia. In a matter of a single sentence, they can transport readers across space and time, to Kenya or Jupiter, to the Middle Ages, or to a time that has not even happened yet.

And central to our purposes, they can create faith in listeners. Because, after all, as Paul reminds us, Faith comes by hearing and hearing by -- what? -- by the Word of God.

So words are a tool given to us by God to help us become fully human, to help us communicate with one another, to help us grow in faith, to help us understand what God intends for us.

But it can go the other way too.

I shared this story several years ago but it bears repeating today. In the summer of 2017, Robyn and I attended the Frederick Beuchner writer's conference at Princeton Seminary.

The scholar and church historian, Diana Butler Bass, offered one of the keynote addresses at the conference. And in that address, she took this idea that our words matter to a whole other level.

For the first fifty minutes of her remarks, Ms. Butler's presentation was mainly focused on her story, of how she came to be a full-time professional whose medium is not law or medicine, but words and ideas.

But then, as she neared the end of her address, something changed. She began to speak less like a scholar and more like a prophet.

There is a dark force at work in our world right now, she asserted. And it is centered around the use of words.

We see a widespread, coordinated attempt underway in the larger culture to lie and to deceive, to obfuscate and manipulate. To undermine the idea of public truth by labeling it fake news. To weaken historic American institutions that depend on words, both political and religious, by draining words of their meaning.

After this powerful set-up Diana delivered her knock-out punch: *This force is not just anti-truth, or anti-word, she observed. It is anti-Christ.*

I want to be really clear about this. She was not referring to the Antichrist you hear about in apocalyptic sermons, a scary figure with a menacing voice and 666 inked across his forehead.

She meant anti-Christ more literally, in the sense of opposed to Christ, contrary to Christ, at odds with everything Jesus, the embodied Word of God, taught and preached and revealed.

It turns out that just this past Friday night, Robyn and I got a glimpse of what this anti-Christ force looks like when it becomes embodied.

We saw the movie *Just Mercy*.

Not to fear. If you haven't seen it yet -- and I hope you do -- I will not give any spoilers. But what I will say is that it tears the cover clean off the racism that pervades our criminal justice system, particularly in the deep South.

And this racism is so pervasive, so open, so defiantly proud, it was difficult to watch it play out.

Watching white police officers pull over a perfectly innocent, law-abiding African American man and arresting him for no reason, or putting a gun to another black man's head just because they can, evoked a powerful mix of feelings in me all at the same time: anger, of course, but also sorrow, and even despair.

But watching this anti-Christ force play out in the wider world, as I did from the comfort of my reclining seat in the theater, this did something else in me, too, something that I found even more troubling.

It brought out the worst in me. It made me want to visit retribution on all the police officers and sheriffs and judges and mayors and governors in Alabama (and throughout the South) who take pleasure in terrorizing the African American residents of their communities, who actively work to strip them of their humanity and violate their rights: the right to vote; the right to not be arrested when they are innocent; the right to be tried by a jury of their peers when their innocence is in question.

I didn't just feel a deep desire to see all these racist law enforcement and public officials lose their jobs and be banished from holding office. I mean I wanted to do them personal harm.

And that, I think, is the power of this anti-Christ force that is at work in our world, a force that is odds with Word of God and the love of God, a force that is in direct conflict with the core teachings of Jesus.

It's also what makes the exhortation I read earlier from Paul so interesting.

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind—just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you—so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

On the one hand, I find this idea of being *enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind* sort of thrilling. I mean, who doesn't want to be smarter and more articulate? On the other hand, and to be perfectly honest, I'm not exactly sure I understand what it means.

But think I might know what it looks like.

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was born and grew up in the deep South. His experience of racism did not come from watching it on movie screens. He experienced it first-hand, felt its toxic sting personally.

He had every right to wish that retribution might be visited on the racist public officials who terrorized his family and his community, who terrorized him.

And yet somehow Dr. King rose above those natural impulses. And using words as his primary tool, this great modern prophet called us all to a higher purpose.

So at the start of this new year, an election year which is likely to be tense, likely to be marred by false, ugly, hate-filled words, I invite you to hear these good words, these prophetic words, these pro-Christ words, these words written or spoken by Dr. King, words filled with love and truth and power. And let them do their sacred work in you.

Let them call you to a higher purpose:

"True peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice."
(from the sermon *When Peace Becomes Obnoxious*).

"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly" (from *Letter from Birmingham Jail*).

"Returning hate for hate multiplies hate, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars. Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that" (from *Strength to Love*).

"I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil (temporarily) triumphant" (from Nobel prize acceptance speech)

I have a dream.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream that one day down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

Yes, I have a dream today. (from I Have a Dream speech).