Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

August 12, 2018

Neal MacPherson

THE POWER OF WORDS Genesis 1:1–5

 Psalm 29

 Ephesians 4:25–5:2

 Matthew 8:8–13

 Behind the words we speak as Christians stands the “Word” of God, and the “Word” of God made flesh in Christ Jesus. In Genesis Chapter 1, God speaks the words, “Let there be light,” and there was light. When God speaks, something happens, something is created, or something comes to an end. With God, there is no idle talk. When the prophets say, “Thus says the Lord,” human beings cannot help but listen, for when God speaks, it is a matter of life or death. Declares the Psalmist:

*The voice of God is powerful;*

 *the voice of God is full of majesty. . .*

*The voice of God breaks the cedars . . .*

*God makes Lebanon skip like a calf,*

 *and Sirion like a young wild ox. . . .*

*The voice of God shakes the wilderness; . . .*

*The voice of God causes the oaks to whirl,*

 *and strips the forest bare. . . .* —from Psalm 29

 Then, the Word of God becomes flesh in Christ Jesus.

In the same manner of God, when Jesus speaks, something happens. In our story from the Gospel of Matthew, the centurion places his faith in Jesus, so much so that he believes Jesus has but to speak the word and his servant will be healed. He himself, as a commander of soldiers, knows what it means to speak a word and others do what he tells them to do. But the word Jesus speaks is even more powerful, powerful enough to heal. Of the centurion, Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith.” And so, Jesus speaks the word, and the centurion’s servant is healed. The centurion is not a Jew. He is a Roman gentile. When he addresses Jesus as “Lord,” he takes a huge risk, for, in effect, he is replacing his faith in Caesar, who was also addressed as “Lord” with his faith in Jesus as “Lord.” Words matter. If Jesus is “Lord” then Caesar is not.

 And so, behind the words we speak as Christians, stands the “Word” of God and the “Word” made flesh in Christ Jesus. Because this is what we believe, the words we ourselves speak matter. Our words have the power to build up or pull down, the power to create harmony or disharmony, the power to heal or destroy. The words we speak matter.

 Just how important the spoken word can be is illustrated by a true story from the Second World War. As you may know, in the 1930’s, Adolf Hitler was successful in getting the Christian church, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, to align itself with the Nazi political agenda. The only exception was the “confessing synod” of the German Protestant Church, which in its Barmen Declaration declared the following:

 We believe that Jesus Christ, as he is attested for

 us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God

which we have to hear and which we have to trust

and obey in life and in death.

The Barmen Declaration went on to say:

 We *reject* the false doctrine, as though the

 Church could and would have to acknowledge as

 a source of its proclamation, apart from this one

 Word of God, still other events and powers,

 figures and truths, as God’s revelation.[[1]](#footnote-1)

In other words, the Confessing Church declared that the Word of God could not be replaced by anything Hitler or any other power might say or do.

 Words matter. At about the same time, Ludwig Müller, a Bishop of the Church who had given his undying allegiance to Hitler and the ideology of the Third Reich, was asked what he believed. He replied, “I can accept *all* the creeds.” But when Heinrich Grüber, the founder of the Grüberbüro, an organization which helped pastors and Jews escape from the Nazis, was asked the same question, he said, simply and boldly, “The *gospel* in our time is that Jesus Christ was a Jew.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

 Such is the power of words, words that declare the truth. Let’s turn to our own day. The spoken word has been cheapened in our society. It’s not only the vulgar and crass language we hear every day in our city streets and in places of influence and power. It is also the truth of what is spoken. Falsehoods and half-truths fill the airwaves. It has been found that President Trump has spoken more than 4,000 untruths or mistruths since he took office less than two years ago. It is hard to trust anything that is being said these days. Stephen Colbert, the comedian, when he was the host of the TV show, *The Colbert Report,* coined the word *“truthiness,”* by which he described anything that sounds like the truth but is not really the truth. Falsehoods and half-truths spoken often but not exclusively by politicians, have an aura of *“truthiness,”* said Colbert. I need not say more.

 Words have been cheapened in our day, and the church does not help the matter by saying that “we should not just talk the talk; we need to walk the walk.” Words matter. Words have a power to create or destroy. Our reading for today from the Letter to the Ephesians urges all those who belong to the Christian community to put away falsehood and to “speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another.” (Ephesians 4:29) Later in our passage, the writer of the letter says: “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.” (Ephesians 4:29)

 I am so glad that in the midst of all the false and untrue words spoken in our world that we have this community of faith, as fragile and weak as it is. For here, one with another, we can speak the truth, and we can use our words to grant courage and hope to one another. We can use our words to build up and not to pull down, to create harmony rather than disharmony, to heal and not destroy. It’s not that we will always live up to our best intentions. That is why we also need to cultivate a spirit of forgiveness among us. But we can speak the truth. We can be honest about ourselves in the presence of God. For our words do matter. Our words have power to engender hope and courage and faithfulness among us.

 I truly believe that Christian communities such as ours and other genuine religious communities of other faith traditions constitute the best-kept secrets of this tumultuous and uncertain age in which we live. It saddens me to think that so many people we know and people who live in our neighborhoods, who are nominally Christian, do not enjoy the blessing of a Christian community in which truth is spoken and shared, and in which an expansive love that knows no bounds of age, race, economic position, or social status is genuinely is upheld and lived. Of course, the only way that they will come to experience such a community is for us to do the inviting.

 My friends, let us hold fast to that which we know is true. Let us never cease to speak the truth of one another and of our world, never forgetting that our words matter, and that the Word of God, which was made flesh in Christ Jesus, remains with us and abides in us forever.

 Let us pray:

 *Dear God, who breathes in the lungs of all people,*

 *who makes speech possible and lives through the*

 *languages of all nations, hear our prayer:*

*Give us the gift of the patient pause, the reflective response.*

 *When we speak let our words build your kingdom before our eyes.*

 *Let the letters of our speech be a foundation for hope and promise.*

 *Let everything we say be to deepen faith and be a sign of your*

 *blessing for all people in the world that you have called good.*

 *AMEN.*

1. A translation of the Barmen Declaration can be found in Cochrane, *The Church’s Confession under Hitler,* 237ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Douglas John Hall, *Confessing the Faith,* 11-12 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)