

Sermon: Words, Words, More Words
Text: Acts 2:37-47
Date: June 18, 2017
Context: WWPC
Father's Day Sunday
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

And [Peter] testified with many other arguments . . .

Acts 2:40

“Words, words, words.”

That is how Nancy Lamers Gross introduced her sermon to us. Nancy is an associate professor of speech communication at Princeton Theological Seminary.

She delivered the sermon during the opening worship service at the 2017 Frederick Buechner Writers' Workshop, which the seminary hosted the week before last, and which Robyn and I both attended.

Boiled down to its bare essence, the main point of Nancy's sermon was that words matter. What we say, how we say them. This matters.

On this point religion and science agree, neuroscience in particular. Recent research has shown that words do indeed matter: the words we say, the stories we tell with those words, these lay down tracks in our brain. These tracks, in turn, can be destructive or productive.

And even beyond that, the stories we tell most often tend to become true. “I am not good enough.” “I don't deserve to be loved.” “I can do anything I put my mind to.”

We make these stories true, in many ways, by telling them. So, our words matter.

The next morning Diana Butler Bass offered a keynote address, in which she took this idea that our words matter to a whole other level.

Diana's name may ring a bell. She is a highly-respected scholar of church life and church history, and she is a bestselling author.

A couple of years ago, our adult education class here at the church studied her book, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*. And I still find myself thinking about it.

For the first fifty minutes of her keynote, Diana's presentation was mainly focused on her story, of how she came to be a full-time professional whose medium is words and ideas.

But then, as she rounded third base and headed for home, something shifted. A seminary graduate, she channeled her inner preacher and delivered a powerful closing homily on why words matter.

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 in play in the larger culture to lie, deceive, gaslight (that is to make victims feel like they are to blame), to obfuscate and manipulate. To undermine truth and beauty. To weaken historic American institutions, both political and religious. [Note: this is a close paraphrase of Diana's remarks.]

After this powerful set up Diana delivered her knock out punch: *You might call this force a kind of anti-Christ, to the extent that it is at odds with the truth.* But she calls it something else. She calls this force anti-Word.

As in, the Word that was in the beginning with God, the Word that was God. The Word that became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. The Word that embodied and taught the Good News of God's redeeming love for the world.

What is to be done in response and resistance to these anti-Word efforts? Well, what if there was an alternative? What if the whole church was full of truth tellers, Diana concluded.

People who use words to advance God's agenda for the world. Who tell the kind of truth that does not shame us but sets us free, that does not oppress us but liberates us.

Truth that relies on human words, yes, but truth rooted in the ultimate Word. Truth that uses words in the service of justice and mercy, words that reconcile and heal, words that create communities of love and peace.

What would happen to the church, and to the world, if a community like that arose on the scene, a community of the Word, capital W? What would that even look like?

Turns out we have an answer to that question because our text for today is a story about that very thing, about what happens when a community of truth-tellers arrives on the scene and, together, they begin to proclaim, and embody, this Word.

Two weeks ago, on Pentecost Sunday, we launched a summer sermon series. The theme for the series is *Utopia for Realists* and it's based on the book by that same title by Rutger Bregman, another historian.

Bregman claims it's time for a new push for a better world. He derives his argument from an analysis of socio-economic (and other) data about the state of the world over the last two hundred years.

But we're going further back.

In our case, we're looking at how the first disciples met the challenges of their day -- how they managed to be the church and grow the church in a world that did not share their values, in the midst of a "corrupt generation", as Peter puts it in the passage I read a moment ago.

We're examining these stories in the hope of finding answers and guidance for how we meet this same challenge in our day, of how to be church in these tumultuous times, living in the midst of our own corrupt generation, where you can brag about sexual assault, and commit sexual assault, without consequences.

Where you can shoot innocent African Americans, and have that shooting captured on video, and still get off scot free. Where you can repeatedly lie to and deceive the America public, and it doesn't make a difference.

Which brings us to our story for today. Pentecost has just happened. That is, the Holy Spirit has descended on the scene in a burst of violent wind and blaze of fire.

And this is the first thing that happens after that.

Peter, the same disciple who denied Jesus, the impulsive bumbler who leapt out of the boat during a storm to get to Jesus and immediately began to sink beneath the waves, the disciple who was so wrong about the identity of the Christ that Jesus once called him “Satan” to his face, this same man now stands up in front of a huge crowd and delivers what many scholars believe to be the first uniquely Christian sermon ever preached.

The response to it was historic: the first moment of growth in the history of the church.

And not just a little growth but a lot. Not just a trickle of converts but a huge surge. Some three thousand people effectively became members of this brand new church on that one historic day.

Why? Because of words.

But, again, not just any words. Human words rooted in *the* Word. Words filled with grace and truth. Words that conveyed the Good News of God’s redeeming love for the world. Words that offered people stuck in lives that were headed in the wrong direction, the chance to repent, to turn around and start anew.

One might view this remarkable event as a perfect case study for a congregation that is committed to growing its membership, but for one tiny problem.

Most biblical scholars agree that the so-called Apostolic Era is over. Which is a short hand way of saying that stuff like this doesn’t happen any more. If there ever was a time when miracles, healings, signs and wonders, and mass conversions occurred, that time is definitely over.

Probably a good number of regular church goers believe this too, for that matter.

But some of us know that this is not true, and least not entirely. We know that events like this one have played out in our world, because we’ve seen them with our own eyes.

At least some of us have. Those of us who have been around long enough to have experienced a Billy Graham crusade, either in person or on TV, have seen it for ourselves.

Now, bear with me for just a second. I am aware that this approach to faith and to church growth, one that depends on mass conversion, makes some of us, perhaps most of us, maybe even all of us, a little queasy.

Most of us here today would not be caught dead in an arena-sized evangelistic crusade, where the preacher was planning to invite thousands of unchurched folks to come forward and repent publicly.

I do understand that. I'm also aware that your sensibilities about this approach to faith is a large part of why you attend a church like this one. Because we're not overtly evangelical, at least not in this same way.

Our priority is not calling on our neighbors to repent, it's on loving our neighbors. It's not calling out sin, it's making peace, and doing justice, and loving mercy, and walking humbly with our God.

Yes, we try hard to cultivate faithful followers, dedicated disciples of Jesus, but we don't ordinarily do that by issuing large-scale altar calls.

I'm aware of all of that. I wouldn't be standing here, in this particular pulpit, if we weren't together on these things.

But it's also possible that we may be missing a crucial point here. I think this story of these first converts may well be instructive for us. Because I think some of our discomfort with this approach to growing the church isn't just a matter of our theological preferences or personal sensibilities.

I think it's at least partly a function of our privilege.

Imagine you're an out of work coal miner. Just two years ago your job paid \$24 an hour and you had full health benefits. But the mine where you worked suddenly closed because natural gas is a lot cheaper to find and produce.

So, now, just to keep food on the table, you've taken a minimum wage job stocking shelves at Walmart and even with that, you've still had to apply for food stamps. It's humiliating.

And because the job at Walmart isn't full time--because Walmart doesn't hire anybody full time--you've also lost your health benefits. And you need those benefits because you have pulmonary issues from all those years breathing coal dust.

All of that together means that life is suddenly acutely stressful for you. The two beers you used to drink after work have turned into six, which you can no longer afford. You're fighting with your spouse constantly, over little stuff, stupid stuff that never used to bother you before.

And then one day a messianic figure rolls into town proclaiming good news, promising a new life and new hope. This hope is rooted in a promise that he will turn things around and bring high paying coal jobs back to your town. On top of that he will find a way to make quality health care affordable for everyone.

Whether or not this promise is true, it's easy to imagine how you might respond to it. In fact we don't have to imagine. We saw this very thing happen on the campaign trail last year. In effect, we witnessed a mass conversion that played out all across the country.

Why? Because words matter. What we say and the stories we tell matter. Even if these stories are not true, even if they are a part of the anti-Word campaign that Diana Butler Bass named so insightfully, they shape what people believe about God, about our world, our country, ourselves.

That is perhaps somewhat sobering news. The awesome news is that the alternative doesn't have to be complicated. To be people of the Word, capital W, we don't have to be Peter and to stand up and preach before a crowd of thousands. We just have to tell the truth, when the opportunity arises.

But we may have to follow Peter's example and offer some testimony. This sounds like a scary word but it doesn't have to be. We recently witnessed for ourselves both how easy it is, and how powerful it is just a few weeks ago.

Per our recent custom, on Memorial Day Sunday we gathered for our bi-annual outdoor worship service in the Pavilion. A man whom nobody knew joined us for our service that day. His father had recently passed away. And because his dad was an alum of Warren Wilson, the son had come to scatter his father's ashes here on campus.

He was searching out a place to do just that when he saw that we were about to hold a worship service. "May I join you?" he said. "Of course," we replied.

So he did. He took a seat and joined us. And then something very special happened. Given our outdoor context, and given that it was Memorial Day Sunday, I asked people to share stories of loved ones they are grateful for. Several people did.

And then this man, this stranger, stood up and told us his story, that he had come to campus to scatter his dad's ashes, to lay his father to rest. But he then went on to say how meaningful our worship service had been for him.

Standing right there in front of all of us, he read the inclusivity statement on the front of our bulletin. And then he opened the bulletin and, choking back tears, he read parts of the Affirmation of Faith we used that day, the words we had all said together to affirm our faith.

He went on to say how grateful he was to know that there was a church like this one, a church that believed these things. A church that used words like the ones on our bulletin cover to describe itself, to convey its core values, words like the ones we used that day to affirm what we believe, to express the faith that animates who we are and what we do.

All of this was a revelation to him. Our words had had an effect on him, and his words had an effect on us. It felt like a Pentecost moment. Like we all wanted to convert to that church, until we realized, we are that church.

After the service, I walked with him up to the Formal Gardens. He told me that he's a member of the Indivisible group that meets in Greenville, South Carolina. In case you don't know, Indivisible is a national movement that's organized around resisting some of the changes we're seeing in the broader culture.

He said that the members of that group tend to see the church as part of the problem. Sadly, this is not unique to that group. Progressive-minded people right here on this campus and across the country tend to see the church as part of the problem, standing on the wrong side of history, standing for the wrong things and against the things that they value and believe in, the things that make for peace and justice, the policies and programs that make for a fairer and better world.

So he was going to take our bulletin to the next meeting of that particular Indivisible group and read the same bits to them that he read for us during our worship service. Who knows? Maybe a Pentecost moment will break out there.

What we do know is that our words matter. The stories we tell make a difference. We also know that we've got good words to share, good stories to tell, and that there is a world out there that is desperate to hear them.

Amen