

The Power of the Word  
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John 15.15-17

On a road trip from Louisiana to Tennessee my great-aunt Gladys and great-uncle Arthur got into a terrible argument and then refused to speak to each other for hours. Finally, to break the silence, when they were passing by a farm Uncle Arthur pointed to a pig pen and said, “Gladys, are those your relatives.” She said, “Yes dear... they’re my in-laws.”

Not the nicest story, but one that shows how the words we choose have an effect.

The prophet Isaiah said, “God has given me the tongue of the learned that I should know how to speak a word in season to those who are weary” (50.4).

The book of Proverbs tells us that a word well spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver (25.11).

James, the leader of the church in Jerusalem wrote even more emphatically, “Consider that a great forest can be set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire... It corrupts the whole person, setting the whole course of one’s life on fire...” (James 3.5-6).

Jesus is remembered as having said, “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 18.18). Binding and loosing are terms that come from an age where magic and miracles were held as scientific truths, where one could be loosed from a curse using the right spell, or one’s evil intentions could be bound, again by the right spell. But what is a spell? An incantation. A set of words intentionally spoken to release power and to bring about a definite result. How do we “bind” or release personal power? By the words we habitually speak.

In the book of Genesis there are two creation myths and the first one we find in chapter one says, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” And how did God go about this business of creating? God spoke. The ancient parable says, “God said, ‘Let there be light.’ And there was light.

And God said, “Let the waters be separated from the land.” And it was so.

And God said, “Let the land produce vegetation.” And it did.

God spoke forth creatures of the air, earth, and seas. And then God said, “Let us make humans in our own image and likeness,” and so God created humans in the divine image, male and female.

The story reads like a children’s bedtime tale, and yet it says something that is very true and that can be proven time and again in our lives... and that is, the word is creative. We

who are made in the divine image have the divine power of the word at our disposal. How will we use this awesome power?

What we say matters.

Words of fear perpetuate fear.

Words of worry perpetuate worry.

Words of hope perpetuate hope.

Words of gratitude perpetuate gratitude.

Words of confidence perpetuate confidence.

Words of praise perpetuate praise.

Words are creative. Whether they are words of pessimism and despair, words of regret and blame, words of forgiveness and reconciliation, words of hope and joyful expectation... the words we speak matter. And the words we habitually speak point our lives in very definite directions... positive or negative. They can bind us, or loose us; in either case, the word creates.

The Apostle Paul told the Romans, "Faith comes by hearing, and what we hear becomes for us the word of God" (Romans 10.17). That is, what we hear over and over, we tend to believe; and what we really believe we often receive. The word is creative. The one way to assure hearing a positive word is to speak it. And we must speak it enough that we finally hear it, so that the word of optimism is for us the word of God, the word of truth, the word pointing us in the right direction in life.

We are free to complain, of course. We can look for the worst, expect failure and defeat, but as we voice those negative attitudes, we tend to believe them deeply, and the more profoundly we believe them, the more they become self-fulfilling prophecies.

The good news is, it works the other way too. We can also choose to be encouraging instead of complaining. We can look for the best. We can expect breakthroughs. We can voice our hopes, our dreams, our affirmations; we can develop and give voice to positive attitudes until we believe the good so deeply that the peace, joy, fulfillment, success and sufficiency that we are proclaiming actually become self-fulfilling prophecies. The choice is ours. As John writes, "in the beginning was the Word." We can begin a new adventure, a new beginning by choosing our words more carefully.

And let's not be too academic, too philosophical, too theoretical about this. Let's put it to the test. Think of a time when you were negative, bitter, afraid, assumed the worst, expected failure, or blamed everyone and everything but your own choices for how you felt. Just think of a time... was it last week, last night, since I've been talking? How did that work out for you? Did it make anything at all even one tiny bit better? Did it make you feel better? Did it make anyone like you more or want to spend more time with you? Did it put money in your pocket or help you sleep at night?

Conversely, think of the last time you laughed. Really, just threw your head back and gave out a belly laugh. For that instant, did you have a care in the world? When we focus

on misery, we tend to be miserable; and when we focus on joy, we tend to be joyous. It really is that simple.

In the nineties, I remember a church concert given by a group that was very talented. They sang old gospel faves, told uplifting stories, even a few good natured jokes. It was a good evening. At the end of the concert, a man in his 30s who weighed about 95 pounds, walking with cane came up to one of the singers and said, “thank you. I had such a good time tonight, it was like for 90 minutes I didn’t have AIDS. For the first time in a long time I didn’t even think about AIDS.” That dear man experienced 90 minutes of healing, 90 minutes of rest, 90 minutes of freedom, 90 minutes of joy because he allowed himself to hear only positive words for a while. Thank God there were people speaking those words.

In our first reading today, we heard 19<sup>th</sup> century American scientist Maria Mitchell remind us that “...the vibrations set in motion by the words that we utter reach through all space and the tremor is felt through all time.”

What we focus on we feed, and what we feed grows. Just like the old Native American parable about an elder teaching a young member of the community that deep inside every person are two wolves; one is content and friendly and the other is vicious and deadly. The young person asked, “which wolf will take over my life?” And the elder said, “whichever one you feed.”

Jesus is feeding us today in John’s gospel. He says, “I don’t call you servants; I call you friends.” He is affirming his disciples. He is encouraging them. He is recognizing their potential, and by recognizing it and naming it, he’s calling it forth. He could have recognized and named other possibilities, but he **CHOSE** to see the good and call it forth. He’s feeding the friendly, content wolf in each of them.

Jesus is speaking a word in season to those who are weary.

Jesus is offering apples of gold in settings of silver.

Jesus is using his word to build up, rather than to destroy like a forest-fire.

Jesus is trying to bind negative attitudes and loose the power of optimism.

Jesus is using the power of his words to create hope and harmony in the life of his community.

Jesus knows that faith comes by hearing, and what we hear and internalize becomes for us the word of God... so he’s making sure that one more time what his people hear is the word of encouragement.

He is using his words to set forth positive vibrations that are reaching even us all this time later.

How will we use our word today? We have a choice, and the choice we make will make a difference.

This is the Good News. Amen.

I speak the word of hope today.  
I speak the word of joy today.  
I speak the word of gratitude today.  
My word is the word of power.  
I choose to use it wisely.  
I declare my good is at hand.  
And so it is!

“Our thoughts, deeds, and words return to us sooner or later with astounding accuracy.”  
— Florence Scovel Shinn