

“Words, Words, Words”

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

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Words! Words! Words! I'm so sick of words!

I get words all day through;

First from him, now from you! Is that all you blighters can do?

Perhaps you thought, when you heard these words, that they were from Eliza Doolittle, of the musical *My Fair Lady*, who needed a little quiet time away from her helpful teachers. But no. These are the words I say when I turn on the radio and hear the news, when I turn on the TV and listen to the commentators, or when I read vitriolic Facebook posts. Enough, already, I think, and off goes the offending media outlet.

To be honest, I just don't need it. Reading about or hearing people argue back and forth, spewing judgmental, accusatory, mean words is just not helpful for my psyche, for my spirit, and I have a choice, so I turn it off.

I am captivated (and sometimes mystified) by the power of words and the way they can be used so powerfully either for good or evil. Words are our primary form of communication with one another. We use words to convey our needs, our

wants, and our feelings. We use words to tell our stories of joy, pain, fear, and transformation. We use words to communicate the mundane facts of life (“It is going to rain today”), to state our requests (“May I borrow your umbrella?”), or to show our gratitude (“Thanks for the ride!”).

Sometimes our words are misunderstood by another. Sometimes our words are angry and hurtful. Sometimes they are healing and kind.

Words have a lot of power.

If you are like me, words have been used against you at some point in your life. I remember the taunting middle school girls who would raise their voices from the “athletes” locker room where they changed after our PE class. Their words of derision and taunt would drift into the “non-athlete” side of the locker room where those of us who were being mocked for being too skinny or too plump or too clumsy quietly faced our lockers and put our school clothes back on and tried not to catch each other’s eyes.

Looking back now, I remember also the others in school who had words used against them. Denise, a girl in my class who had a skin disease was called a name behind her back, and probably more than once to her face. Lisa, my friend with scoliosis who had to wear a full torso brace for a good portion of high school

knew too well how she was mocked for her strange looks. How hurtful that must have been. How that must have left deep emotional scars.

We all remember the taunt we used to sing back to those who called us names, “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” We also all know how absolutely incorrect that taunt really is. Hurtful words hurt.

Hurtful words also destroy community. The author of the letter to the Ephesians understood this when he wrote to this new Christian community. Earlier in this letter, the author reminds these new followers of Christ that in their baptisms, they have “put on Christ.” The old life has gone and their new life as a community of believers has begun. In this *new* community, there is a new way of living together. In our passage for today, this new life is outlined in terms of “particular practices and prohibitions”¹ – ways a newly baptized Christian should live. To begin with, as members of the Body of Christ they should be honest with one another and not speak falsehoods. This echoes clearly the commandment not to bear false witness, or not to lie. We should have the courage and faith in the strength of our community to speak truth in kindness, ultimately seeking the good of the whole body.

¹ Jaime Clark-Soles, “Ephesians 4:25-5:2, Exegetical Perspective,” *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 3*, () 327.

This letter also instructs the Ephesians to be careful in their anger. Anger in and of itself isn't evil. Certainly, the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, and even Jesus had plenty of righteous anger toward the sins of the people. The writer knows that there are good and just reasons to be angry. But if you are angry, do not let your anger lead to sin. Anger that lingers, festers, and grows too hot can lead to damaging, hurtful actions that are not beneficial to the community.

In addition, the Ephesian Christians should not steal; rather, they should work honestly in order to be able to share with those in need. They should put away all bitterness, wrath, anger, wrangling, and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another . . .

If only our talk-show hosts and politicians would put away all bitterness, wrath, wrangling, slander and malice. If only the pundits would be kind to one another. If only we all could be kind to one another.

Am I living in a dream-world? Do you think me naïve? Perhaps. Especially on the weekend of Unite the Right 2 and the one-year anniversary of violence and a young woman's death in the Charlottesville white supremacy rally. But what if we all committed to living in this way? What if we did what the Ephesians are being asked to do as a part of the Christian community – “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.”

I don't remember exactly how it started, perhaps it was a Bible study on this very passage, but when I was a camp counselor one summer years ago, I remember clearly reflecting with my campers on the words we used toward one another – Did the words we used that day build someone up or break someone down? We reflected regularly on words we heard ourselves or others use – did they build others up or break others down? We started intentionally choosing words of encouragement, affirmation, and love, words that would build someone up, make them feel better, stronger, happier, and more included and accepted. Our words, instead of breaking people down and making them feel small, lonely, and ashamed, began to build people up. Then those people, in turn, began to use words that built up others around them. This is how Christian community should be.

I can't help but think that this is how the world should be, too. Don't you agree? Shouldn't we all be speaking truth to one another in kindness, compassion, and love? Wouldn't this make the world a more peaceful, grace-filled, and joyful society? Wouldn't we be able to communicate so much better if our words didn't attack the “other” every time they came out of our mouths? Well, of course. But here's the thing. We can't change the words that come out of *other* people's

mouths. We can only change what comes out of our own. We can only begin the work of peacemaking and reconciliation in this world in our own families, in our own neighborhoods, in our own workplaces, in our own classrooms, and in our own communities.

This passage is reminding us that the way we live, the way we speak, the way we interact with one another, affects the strength of our community. We cannot jump immediately to judgement of one we don't fully understand. We must ask, and listen, and be honest, and be willing to hear honesty. And be willing to grow, and change, and love the way God loves us.

This passage ends with the exhortation to do just that – love the way God loves us. “Be imitators of God,” says the writer of Ephesians. “And live in love, as Christ loved us.” This kind of love in the Greek is translated as *agape* love. Agape love isn't the kind of love you have for your favorite ice cream, or your favorite Broadway musical. Agape love isn't even the same kind of love you have for a friend or a brother or a sister. Agape is a word used in the Greek to represent the deepest, most life-giving kind of love. It is unconditional love – a free gift, a gift of grace – not because someone deserves to be loved, but because this is the kind of love God gives us and this is the kind of love we are called to give others – not just those who are like us – who look like us, act like us, think like us, or vote

like us – agape love is the kind of love we are called to give to everyone. Agape love is the kind of love we are called to reflect with our words – in kindness, compassion, forgiveness, mercy, grace, and generosity of spirit.

Many of you have seen the movie about Mr. Rogers called “Won’t You Be My Neighbor.” It is a beautiful movie, requiring a good bit of tissue if you are a crier like me, and it shows the heart of Mr. Rogers, which is pure and good, kind and full of agape love. Fred Rogers, a Presbyterian minister, believed in his heart that he was called to imitate God in the way that he dealt with every human being – with agape love. When you love someone with this kind of love, you see to their inner core of goodness, light, and possibility, even if they seem to be acting to the contrary. You see them with eyes that are kind and compassionate. You see them with a heart full of unconditional love.

In his last commencement speech, Fred Rogers shared these words with the graduating seniors:

Our world hangs like a magnificent jewel in the vastness of space.

Every one of us is a part of that jewel. A facet of that jewel. And in the perspective of infinity, our differences are infinitesimal. We are intimately related. May we never even pretend that we are not. Have you heard my favorite story that came from the Seattle Special Olympics? Well, for the 100-yard dash there were nine contestants, all of them so-called

physically or mentally disabled. All nine of them assembled at the starting line and at the sound of the gun, they took off. But not long afterward one little boy stumbled and fell and hurt his knee and began to cry. The other eight children heard him crying; they slowed down, turned around and ran back to him. Every one of them ran back to him. One little girl with Down Syndrome bent down and kissed the boy and said, "This'll make it better." And the little boy got up and then the rest of the runners linked their arms together and joyfully walked to the finish line. They all finished the race at the same time. And when they did, everyone in that stadium stood up and clapped and whistled and cheered for a long, long, time. People who were there are still telling the story with great delight. And you know why. Because deep down, we know that what matters in this life is more than winning for ourselves. What really matters is helping others win too. Even if it means slowing down and changing our course now and then.

In our words, in our actions, in our lives, may we be so brave, so kind, and so full of God's agape love. I pray it will be so.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.