

Title: Speak Life

Date: 10/9/2022 (Proper 23, Year C)

Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church

Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)

Readings: [Jeremiah 29:1, 4-7](#); [Psalm 66:1-11](#); [2 Timothy 2:8-15](#); [Luke 17:11-19](#)

Video Link: https://youtu.be/U_xQoOmWFWk?t=965

O God, we pray that your grace always precede and follow us,
as we seek to build houses and live in them,
to plant gardens and eat what they produce,
and to work toward peace and wholeness
in the places in which you have sent us.

Amen.

Today, we read from the second letter of Paul to Timothy. It was probably not written by Paul. More likely it was written by someone who shared Paul's struggles, a mentor whose mentee was having a hard time teaching and guiding newly formed Christian communities. So, the mentor offers guidelines such as, "[W]arn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening" (2 Tim 2:14).

Perhaps this means people in the first century, even without the benefit of Facebook or Twitter, were already co-opting the words of Jesus, twisting them to create conflicts that build up a base of support for their own agendas.

Perhaps this means I should preach really short sermons so I don't end up ruining those of you who are listening.

Finding the right words, having the right words, putting the right words into practice are really important though. When I first got to seminary, it felt like everyone was speaking a different language, and I don't mean Hebrew or Greek. I knew what most of those English words meant **individually**, but when they're put together in a different way, when they're spoken in a church or a classroom, they take on different meanings.

During that first semester, looking ahead at the next three years, it felt like each year was going to be focused on a different theme.

The focus of the first year would be learning to think the words, to understand their new meanings.

The focus of the second year would be learning to speak the words, to preach them to an entire congregation, or to offer them one-on-one as a chaplain.

The focus of the third year would be living the words, to absorb them into my body, my very being, and put them into action in daily life and in all aspects of my ministry.

In practice, these three themes blended into each other over the course of the three years. Still, having this framework of thought, word, and deed was a helpful reminder

that the words contained in scripture **can't** just stay in the book. They haven't stayed in the book.

These words have been used to form families and to break them, to bring life and to cause death, to encourage the children of God and to diminish them. The way these words are interpreted guide what we think, what we say, and what we do.

Wrangling is important because these words can help us turn toward a loving, liberating and lifegiving God,

or create a distance between us and God
by implying that God demands
that we earn God's forgiveness, love and grace.

Wrangling is important because these words
can help us understand that we exist in relationships,
as the children of God and members of the body of Christ,
or they can fool us into thinking
that we can be fully self-sufficient and in total control.¹

Wrangling is important because these words
can help us recognize and embrace
the image of God in the neighbors that are not "us",
however you define yourself,
or they can keep us from
seeking and respecting Christ in all persons (BCP 303).

These meanings and values are transmitted through words, and people absorb them, whether consciously or unconsciously. So, it's important to be precise and careful with these words. It's important to wrangle.

At the same time, it's possible to get so bogged down with wrangling over words that we lose sight of the underlying principles that give these words purpose and help us put those words into context.

This is why the writer of 2 Timothy says, "Remind them of this" before he gives the warning against wrangling.

By "Remind them of this" he means remind them of Jesus Christ, the reason they are listening to these words in the first place. Remind them of the truths he imparted about Christ's relationship with us. "If we have died with him, we will also live with him," (2 Tim 2:11) and so on.

As we start wrangling over words, we need to hold up these truths so that we can measure our understanding against them before we go out to speak and live these words.

Couple of weeks ago, I was the passenger in a car going south from downtown. As we were driving on the interchange from I-35 to 290-W, my eyes were drawn to two words spray painted on the side of the interchange going in the opposite direction. "SPEAK

LIFE.” Just two words, giant and red and in capital letters, with a heart next to it. “Speak **life.**”

I was writing a sermon that day, and I thought to myself, “Well, that sums it up.” The goal of a sermon is to preach Christ, so that we can speak as Christ did and live as Christ did. That’s very broad.

Narrowing it down for a given Sunday requires something like a Venn diagram. There is one circle each for the readings from scripture assigned for the week, for the conversations we’ve had this week, for the podcasts I’ve listened to, the articles or books I’ve read, for the things that are happening out in the world, and so on.

Some weeks, that translates into “preach life” so that our thoughts, words and deeds are aimed toward having life and having it more abundantly (Jn 10:10). Some weeks, that translates into “preach love” so we can “speak love” and “be love.”

This week, ten lepers met Jesus on the road. Mindful of their contagious skin condition and their unclean state, they kept their distance from him, as they did with everyone else they came across. In one voice, they called out to Jesus, “[M]aster, have mercy on us!”

Jesus sent them on their way to their priests, because the priests had to verify that they were clean, and then they had to make a sacrifice before their physical and social isolation could come to an end.

All ten were made clean. Perhaps all ten were grateful to Jesus, yet only one of them turned back. Not only did he praise God loudly for everyone to hear, he laid himself flat on the ground in front of Jesus, and thanked him.

Jesus told him, “Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well” (Lk 17:19). I’m pretty sure Jesus did not make the other nine sick again because they didn’t turn around and say thank you. So, he’s not just talking about the man’s physical well-being.

Some translations read “Your faith has made you healthy again” or “your faith has restored you to health.”² Those words are dangerous because that implies that physical healing can and has to be earned, even though Jesus offered it to all ten lepers so freely and easily. They are also dangerous because it implies that being sick is the person’s fault; they’re not getting better because they don’t have enough faith.

So, I want to make it clear that whether or not someone recovers from an illness or injury, or whether it takes them a long time to recover, that is not God pronouncing judgment on whether or not that person has “enough” faith. I’m not just saying that because this ankle is taking a long time to heal. Being sick is hard enough without thinking of it as punishment from God.

There are other translations of this verse that doesn’t so directly tie the former leper’s physical health to his religious beliefs³: “Thy faith hath made thee whole”; “your trust has saved you;” “your faith has restored you.”

Perhaps being whole has something to do with recognizing that everything we have comes from God, from the source of all. It's important not just to recognize it but to say it out loud, to act as if we believe it, whether by being vocal with our praise and gratitude, or sharing our good treasures.

Perhaps being saved comes from recognizing that we don't do it all ourselves; everything we do, we do with God's help. So, we are saved from our troubles, and from ourselves, when we remember to ask for help. Sometimes it takes more strength to ask for help than to take on everything ourselves.

Perhaps being restored is going from a state of isolation, which he suffered as a leper, to a state of connection. Now he can prostrate himself at Jesus' feet; he doesn't have to keep his distance anymore. Becoming well, become whole, is bolstered by a sense of belonging.

When Jesus says, "Your faith has made you well," he is preaching a holistic well-being. The well-being of the man who turned back is not just about his physical health in this moment but about him being whole and saved and restored in a way that will serve him well long after he goes on his way. His story of being whole and saved and restored will bring wholeness and well-being to those he will encounter in the future.

Jesus does not divide body from heart and mind and soul, and we are called to love God with all of our heart, all of our mind, all of our soul and all of our might. Just as the words of scripture ought to spill over into thought, word and deed, Jesus wants our whole self, not just the part we're comfortable with giving him, not just the part that's easy to give when things are going well, not just the part that's easy to give when things are going badly. Jesus wants us to wrangle with the words, but within this larger context of wholeness and flourishing, for us and for the places and situations in which we have been sent.

How will you speak wholeness this week?

How will you be wholeness this week?

How will you speak salvation? That feels like a BIG question, and maybe that's what makes it worth asking.

Lastly, how will restoration run through your thoughts words and deeds this week?

Looking forward to hearing your answers.

¹ <https://faithandleadership.com/willie-james-jennings-naming-the-foundational-problems-theological-education-we-can-aspire>

² <https://www.biblegateway.com/verse/en/Luke%2017:19>

³ <https://www.biblegateway.com/verse/en/Luke%2017:19>