

SPEAK UP
Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:4-11
Sermon, 8/12/18

I came across a letter recently that was dated January, 1994. It had come from someone I honestly did not remember. Skip evidently was a member of a youth group that my wife and I had led in the 1960's. The letter had come in response to her death, which he had heard about from some people who had been members of a neighboring church, whose youth group had joined with ours. Skip was one of the kids from that congregation. I was stunned by this very personal note from someone I did not remember. It told of how he wondered where Judie and I were living because he had wanted to thank us for something we had done and said years earlier. Skip told of his very troubled youth and how he yearned for someone who would care about him without judgment. "I found that in you and Judie." While very flattering, it was also bothersome that I could not picture him, even after reading the letter a couple of times. He said that there had been several times when we reminded him that he was a person of worth and had a lot going for him and that he needed to look closely at his life, especially his decision making process. "You are at risk of destroying your life needlessly" is what he remembered hearing. Skip went on to say that those words registered along the way, long after we had left Brooklyn, long after I had any conscious memory of him. I have since formed a picture of him, and recall some of his situation as a teen. The letter ended with these words. "I just wanted to thank you for a word well spoken and well placed. It took some time to look to inside myself, but I did it and now am achieving my potential. Thank you for words that saved my life."

This story is not about me, nor is it about Judie. It is about the power of words. For you see, Skip had heard other words as well as he struggled to mature, and they were less than affirming. Words such as "You will never amount to anything." "You have no talent." "You are nothing but trouble." Most sadly, these words were from his parents. How grateful I was, and still am, that he heard a different word, a needed word, that were life giving.

Welcome to a simple message this morning!

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light' and there was light.

From time immemorial the spoken word is important. Even in the scriptural stories of creation, life begins with a well-chosen word, even as it can end with an ill-conceived word.

How many relationships have been destroyed by a word, even a word unspoken? I cannot tell you how often I've heard the cry of a spouse as he or she faced a crisis because of what the other one had said or had not say. Nor can I tell you how many congregations Barbara and I (as members of the NY Annual Conference team of Consultants) have worked with congregations in conflict), and of how often the root of conflict has been found in ill-conceived destructive words.

Words matter. What we say and what we don't say matters. The ditty we learned as kids is not completely true. ***Sticks and stones can hurt my bones, but names will never harm me.*** Names and words, can in fact hurt, can harm, they can destroy it.

Mark introduces his Gospel, ***the good news of Jesus Christ*** by presenting John the Baptist as one who ***proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*** Which is to say John came with words the world needed to hear. Those words, for those who heard them were life changing.

The Book of Acts tells of the travels of Paul and of his preaching. It is a clear indication that the early church began and grew through words that were well spoken and well chosen. There would not have been the Church, had the good news, ***the word of God***, not been spoken. The Book of Acts says, ***on hearing this (Paul's word) they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.*** It is telling that the birthday of the Church, (which we observed on Pentecost Sunday) centers around the gift of tongues. Our faith is one centered on the power of speech. In fact John's gospel opens with, ***In the beginning was the Word.*** God's word may be felt within us but it remains there unless is spoken. It needs to be shared. Lest we make an erroneous assumption, this message is not a plea for simply talking about our faith, we surely need to love it as well. Our world needs, as it always has needed, a word of hope, a word of life's meaning, a word of healing and reconciliation. It may not get the word unless some of us are willing to share it.

It does matter that we tell someone that she is loved.

It does matter that we tell someone that there is a better direction for his life than the one he is currently going.

It does matter that we tell our elected officials at every level what our faith expects of them.

It does matter that our youth hear a different voice than they sometimes hear, hear that God offers them a better alternative.

These things all matter. The world needs to hear other options. The option we have heard begins with a word. ***Come, follow me.*** This word leads to love for all, peace and justice for all. It is a life giving word for anyone who will listen.

H. Ernest Nichol penned a hymn I grew up on. It may be dated musically and lyrically, it may even contain a simplistic theology, but it speaks of a truth we forget at our own loss and the world's loss. Large congregation or small, wealthy or poor, it is still true that, ***We've a story to tell to the nations, that shall turn their hearts to the right, a story of truth and mercy, a story of peace and light.***

Who will tell that story if we are not willing to speak up? The story is like a seed. Someone has to plant it in order for it to grow. The seed was planted in Skip. That was our task. The seed grew, not because of Judie or me. The Spirit of God, the spirit that encourages life into being, the Spirit that lives within each of us led Skip to new life. Yet for new life to happen, someone has to plant a seed.

Henry David Thoreau noted that: ***Though I do not believe that a plant will spring up where no seed has ever been, I have great faith in a seed. Convince me that you have a seed there, and I am prepared to expect great wonders.***
We have the seed. If it is not planted, it cannot come to fruition.

Where do we, you and I, need to plant a seed?

Who do we know who needs a life giving word?

What situation in our personal lives and communal lives needs changing for the better? Where are words of life needed to encourage new direction, new growth?

Listen, the Word has been spoken. The Word is being spoken.

Come, follow me. That is the word. Hear Jesus as he speaks words of compassion, as he speaks a word of insight to power. Hear his call to follow, as he speaks of the Divine Love that will not let him go. Come and follow as he speaks.

“I am prepared to expect great wonders.”

What do we expect?