

WORDS AND THE WORD

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

This story about Mark Twain comes in many different forms, but I like this one best:

A preacher who thought highly of himself regularly invited Mark Twain to attend worship and hear him preach. Mark Twain always had an excuse not to attend. Finally, he agreed to attend the next Sunday service. The preacher was very excited and, because Mark Twain would be in the congregation, he worked especially hard on his sermon during the week.

Sunday morning arrived and, sure enough, Mark Twain was in the congregation, sitting front and center on the first pew. The preacher launched into his sermon with full energy and enthusiasm. From time to time, he would glance at Mark Twain to gauge his reaction, but Twain just sat there stony-faced with his arms crossed. The preacher was disappointed but undaunted, so he kept on preaching for quite a while.

When the service ended and Mark Twain shook hands with the preacher, the minister couldn't resist asking the great writer, "What did you think of my sermon?" Mark Twain said, "Reverend, it was a rip snorter, but I must tell you, I have a book in my study that has in it every word you just preached." The preacher was surprised, shocked, and offended. He protested, "That can't be possible! I worked on my sermon all week. It is an original work. I must see this book you are talking about." Twain told him, "I will send you a copy."

The next morning a messenger arrived with a bulky package from Mark Twain. The preacher urgently ripped open the package and found inside a large, unabridged dictionary, along with Mark Twain's handwritten note: "Words, just words!"

As someone who has preached week in and week out for more than thirty-six years, I find Mark Twain's comment very humbling: "Words, just words!" There are words, and then there is ***the Word***. You can hear the contrast in Paul's encouragement and warning to Timothy about the right handling of God's Word:

* I may be in chained up in prison, but the word of God is not chained.

* The word is trustworthy: Jesus Christ remains faithful.

* Avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening.

* Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker rightly explaining the word of truth.

Have you ever wondered how many words there are in the Bible? That's kind of a geeky question, but interesting just the same. However, it's not so easy to answer, because of the large number of translations and paraphrases of God's Word. A quick

Google search revealed that the King James Version of the Bible contains approximately 783,000 words in the Old and New Testaments. That's a lot of words! But they are not words, just words — they express **the Word**. And, while Paul's advice to Timothy about the right handling of the word of truth might sound like advice just for ministers and preachers, we would all do well to do our best to present ourselves to God as ones approved by God, workers who have no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.

Try as I might, I don't think I ever convinced my children that, in many ways, it's much easier to write a twenty page essay than a good five page paper. It's not simply a matter of comparing the number of pages. You can write lots and lots of words and fill up twenty pages, but it takes a much diligent effort to distill your thoughts into fewer and more meaningful words. When Jim Sils asked me to write the monthly column for The Duplin Times, he told me it should be about 500 words. When I wrote the first couple of columns, I fixated on the word counter on my computer. I would watch it get closer and closer to the 500 word limit, then I would quit writing. However, I wasn't particularly satisfied with the results. So, I changed my approach. Now I sit down and write what I have to say, no matter how many words it takes. Then I go back and pare it down to 500 words. That forces me to focus and express myself more clearly. And, I hope, it makes for better writing and reading.

On November 19, 1863, Edward Everett gave a speech that lasted two hours. He had worked on the speech for months and, on that day as was his custom, he spoke from memory. Everett had been a minister, an instructor at then president of Harvard, a five-term member of the U.S. House of Representatives, governor of Massachusetts, ambassador to England, U.S. Secretary of State, and U.S. Senator. It was reported that many in the crowd who heard Everett speak that day were moved to tears.

The speaker who followed Edward Everett that November day spoke a total of 273 words in about two minutes time. His name was Abraham Lincoln, and his speech came to be known as the Gettysburg Address. We all know which speech had the most impact, which words are still remembered one hundred fifty-six years later. Even Dr. Everett himself recognized the impact of President Lincoln's words compared to his lengthy oration. The day after the speeches, Everett wrote the President and said, "I should be glad, if I could flatter myself that I came as near to the central idea of the occasion, in two hours, as you did in two minutes."¹

In his own words to Timothy, the apostle Paul refers to "the word." This raises the question, what is the word? Paul gives us some good hints about the content of "the word." They make even more sense when you think about how we call Jesus Christ "the Word of God" — as in "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." (John 1:1, 14)

Paul says, "The word is sure and trustworthy . . ."

- * If we have died with him, we will also live with him.
- * If we endure, we will also reign with him.
- * If we deny him, he will also deny us.
- * If we are faithless, he remains faithful — for he cannot deny himself.

It is that last word — “for he cannot deny himself” — that offers us the hope we have in this life and for the life to come.

Some scholars have suggested that Paul includes a couple of early Christian creeds in his advice to Timothy — a few words that sum up the central place of Jesus Christ for your life and mine. In most Bibles, the words “If we have died with him, we will also live with him . . . etc.” are indented to look like the words of a poem or hymn. That’s because those words might well have been an early Christian hymn or affirmation of faith. Also, our epistle reading this morning began with these words: “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David — that is my gospel.” (2 Timothy 2:8) That affirmation of faith sounds very much like Paul’s summary in Romans 1:3-4 of the gospel he proclaimed: “the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Speaking of affirming our faith in the Word with our human words, today’s Affirmation of Faith is different from the Apostles’ Creed we typically use in Sunday worship. Today we are using the Nicene Creed, which dates from the 4th century A.D. These ancient words make up the most ecumenical of the creeds and confessions of the Church universal. With Christians down through the centuries and across the world still today, we use these words to state and affirm what we believe about the Word God has spoken into the world and into our lives in the person of Jesus Christ. While most people might think of a “confession” as an admission of guilt, “when Christians make a confession, they say, ‘This is what we most assuredly believe, regardless of what others may believe and regardless of the opposition, rejection, or persecution that may come to us for taking this stand.’”²

In light of Paul’s warning to Timothy against “wrangling over words,” it’s somewhat ironic that this most ecumenical and important of Christian confessions of faith has a history of debate and dispute over one single word — actually, one little Greek letter! The Roman Emperor Constantine tried to unite the church which was divided on theological issues, especially the question “Who is Jesus Christ?” The Emperor convened the great ecumenical council at Nicaea in 325 A.D. The creed that resulted from the council was signed by the majority of the bishops present, but two Greek words — different by only the Greek letter “iota” — were debated for the next sixty years! In 381 A.D. a second council convened in Constantinople to resolve the issue and today we have the Nicene Creed.

It’s easy to do some Monday morning quarterbacking from the safe distance of 1,600 years and shake our heads at Christians quibbling about one little word, even one little letter — especially when Paul warns against “wrangling over words.” But that one

little word — that one little letter — was the Church’s faithful attempt to say in so many words what we believe to be true about **the Word** of God in Jesus Christ. So, I encourage you to pay attention to the words of the Nicene Creed this morning as we confess our faith in God and God’s Word to us in Jesus Christ.

But the question is, what do we do with the Word? The Alternative Sunday School Class has recently begun a study of the letter of James in the New Testament. Today’s lesson had this advice, “But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers, who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like.” (James 1:22-24)

When he was President, Abraham Lincoln attended the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church and became friends with the minister Dr. Phineas Gurley. The President said, “I like Gurley. He don’t preach politics. I get enough of that through the week, and when I go to church, I like to hear the gospel.” Lincoln would often attend the Wednesday night services. According to one source, Dr. Gurley let the President sit in his study with the door ajar, so Lincoln could hear his sermon but not have to interact with the people. “One Wednesday evening as Lincoln and a companion walked back to the White House after the sermon, the president’s companion asked, ‘What did you think of tonight’s sermon?’ ‘Well,’ Lincoln responded, ‘it was brilliantly conceived, biblical, relevant, and well presented.’ ‘So, it was a great sermon?’ ‘No,’ Lincoln replied, ‘it failed. It failed because Dr. Gurley did not ask us to do something great.’”³

God’s Word — **the Word** — asks us to do something great: “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David” and “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth.”

Every Sunday we offer a Prayer for Illumination before we listen for God’s Word. Here’s a prayer that speaks about words and the Word. These words are a good guide for hearing and responding to God’s Word.

God of mercy, you promised never to break your covenant with us. In the midst of the multitude of words in our daily lives, speak your eternal Word to us that we may respond to your gracious promises with faithfulness, service and love. Amen.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, we pray that we might do our best to present ourselves to God as one approved by him. In your faithfulness to us, you shower us with grace, mercy, love, and all we need; we pray that you would shape our hearts that they would be filled with gratitude, that we might always return to you and give you thanks. Amen.

NOTES

¹ “Edward Everett Gives Gettysburg Address, November 19, 1863,” at www.massmoments.org.

²*The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I: Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 2016), p. v.

³Information taken from two sources: “The Preachers: Phineas D. Gurley,” at *Mr. Lincoln & Friends* at www.mrlincolnanfriends.org. and Nelson Searcy, “What Makes a Great Sermon? Abraham Lincoln’s Opinion . . .” April 12, 2010, at www.churchleaderinsights.com.