

Ephesians 4:25-5:2
John 6:35, 41-51
2009

Words Matter

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This is my first Sunday back after another delightful summer vacation. Once again, my extended family and various friends of family gathered at a cottage on a lake in western New York. In all, there were 25 of us; children, teenagers, young adults, and mature adults behaving like teenagers. We enjoyed great food, cheap Canadian beer, splashing around in the lake, and fireworks, which, strictly speaking, are illegal in the state of New York so the less said about them, the better.

We did have a solemn occasion. Our cousin Peter died last winter. He had become involved with Scientology and withdrew from the family years ago. When he died alone in Florida, no one noticed; no one there seemed to care. Peter practiced a religion of sorts, but it provided no community for him. It reminded me how richly blessed I am to be a part of family and church communities. We gathered for an informal family memorial service. Then we sent some of his ashes aloft on sky rockets, which, for cousin Peter, was entirely appropriate.

Being on vacation, I took along a book to read. Vacation reading ought to be a break from the usual routine. In my case that would mean nothing on theology, biblical history, or social issues. I chose Predictably Irrational by Dan Ariely, a book on economics. While not exactly a trashy beach novel, it was a break from my usual routine.

Among other things, the author explores dishonesty. In 2004, robbery, burglary, larceny, and auto theft cost Americans \$16 billion. This is outrageous! We have a huge crime problem in this country! We need more police, prisons, and elaborate home security systems! Wait, there's more. People buy clothes, wear them once or twice, and return them for a full refund. This little scam costs retailers \$16 billion a year. That's nothing compared to employee theft and fraud in the work place which costs our economy \$600 billion a year; more than what all the career criminals in the United States could steal in their lifetimes. Add in fraudulent insurance claims and fudged tax returns, and the author comes to the distressing conclusion that just about everyone is cheating. There's a reason economics is called "the dismal science."

But there is hope. Ariely conducted an experiment. He gave a math test to college students. Half had to turn in their papers. Half graded themselves and reported their scores without showing their test papers. The first group couldn't cheat. The second group could. Both groups got \$10 for each correct answer. The group that could cheat reported 33% more correct answers. Not having to turn in their test papers did not make them smarter. They cheated. They inflated their scores by 33%.

The author repeated the experiment. This time there were two groups that could cheat. The first was asked to write down the titles of 10 books they read in high school before taking the math test. The second group was asked to write down as many of the Ten Commandments as they could remember. What do you think happened?

The first group that recalled 10 books from high school inflated their scores by 33%. The second group of students that simply tried to remember the Ten Commandments did not cheat at all. Almost none remembered all ten. Even students who could only remember one or two did not cheat. It seems that being reminded of a moral benchmark, even if the students couldn't recall the details, had a profound effect on their behavior.

There I was, on vacation in western New York, reading a book on economics, trying not to think of anything work related, and what comes to mind but worship? We gather on Sundays, and in scripture, sermons and songs are reminded of the gospel ethic of justice, compassion, and love. Even if we don't remember the specifics from one week to the next, and I certainly don't, those words have power. They shape who we are as individuals and as a community.

This brings us to today's reading from Ephesians. It is an ethical exhortation. As such, it is pretty standard fare. There is that brief bit about thieves who should stop stealing and do honest work. Crime is an easy target, but thieves make up a tiny fraction of the population at large and an equally tiny population in the church.

In fact, most of the passage has to do with words—speech and its impact on human relationships. We struggle constantly over definitions of “free speech”, “hate speech”, “obscene speech”, and so on. What is Christian speech? This passage gives us a list of things it is not. No anger, quarreling, bitterness, ruining the reputation of another, lying, deceit. Translated into positive terms, Christian speech is truthful, helpful, positive, builds up, is kind, and offers words of forgiveness. It's a much bigger deal than avoiding so called “dirty words”. It is a higher standard of verbal interaction with others than many of us practice.

We live in a culture of complaint. People complain about the heat in August and the cold in February. Pundits complain on editorial pages and talk radio. People complain about their jobs and complain when they're laid off. I got together with high school classmates in New York. Many complained at length about aging. First, we're not that old, and considering the alternative, we should be rejoicing.

Sometimes it is necessary to complain. The profits certainly did when they spoke the truth to corrupt power. But if we constantly focus on what's wrong with the world, our own words have the power to turn us into bitter, helpless victims.

The church is not a culture of complaint, but fundamentally a culture of praise. We celebrate the good news of the gospel of Jesus. We should hear that in our speech which is truthful **and** kind **and** positive **and** builds up. If parents made a discipline of saying at least twenty truthful, positive things to each other and their children every day, we'd have a lot more happy families. It might be as simple as saying you appreciate the other person putting the cap back on the toothpaste tube or hanging up the bath towel. Build up other members of your household at least twenty times a day and it will lift your spirits as well as theirs. Words matter.

Those of us who live alone still interact with co-workers, friends, and store clerks. If we put our minds to it we can find something positive and kind to say to other people many times a day.

The more we do it, the more spring we'll have in our step and the more gladness we'll have in our hearts. Words matter.

Of all places, we might practice Christian speech in church. If you notice a child who is particularly well behaved or offers an insightful comment at Children's Time, you might compliment the child and the child's parent. You might let an usher know you appreciated the warm greeting he or she offered. You might check the list in the Narthex and express your appreciation to whoever is looking after the children during the service, whether or not you have children yourself. At coffee hour, you could stick your head in the kitchen and thank the people who brewed the coffee and supplied the pastries. This is not just being thoughtful or polite. This is part of who we are called to be as Christians. It builds up this community for worship and service. Words matter.

Trying to recall the Ten Commandments had a dramatic impact on the honesty of college students. The words we speak have an equally transformative effect. We have opportunities every day to highlight the best in other people, and so build them up. In doing so, we ourselves are built up. Try it. Words matter. Amen.

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