

“Words to Live By” – AUGUST 23, 2015 (John 6:56-69)

Thank you Janet and Michelle...

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Well, he said it. He said the word that made Mr. Berry, our seventh grade homeroom teacher turn purple each and every time it was uttered. So once again, my best friend, Jeremy Davis, found himself on the wrong end of a piece of chalk – not that there’s a right end when you’re in seventh grade.

Mr. Berry had had it – and whatever the ‘it’ was he’d had, he’d had ‘it’ up to HERE. And once again Jeremy was held after school – his punishment: writing the same sentence two *hundred* times... “‘Ain’t’ is not a word.”

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Jeremy’s dad was my ride home that afternoon, so I sat on the floor in the hallway outside of Mr. Berry’s classroom waiting for Jeremy to complete his penance. The door was left open and I listened uncomfortably as chalk rattled on slate, like he was slowly carving each letter into its surface. Jeremy had worked a lobster boat with his dad since he was big enough to walk, so even at the age of twelve he had the hands of a working man. The chalk too delicate, the words and writing too precise; his calloused, cracked, burned hands worked against not for him.

I heard him pause, and then walk to the far end of the black board starting another line like an anthropomorphized typewriter ribbon.

‘Ain’t is not a word.’

I'm not sure how long it took, but I was through all of my math and into my social studies homework by the time he was done.

I heard Mr. Berry ask, "Well? Are you finished?"

"Yup," answered Jeremy.

"Have you learned your lesson?" asked Mr. Berry in his terse home-room-teacher voice.

"Yup," said Jeremy putting the chalk down on the rim of the board.

"So, you will not say it again." I couldn't tell if this was a question or a declaration on Mr. Berry's part.

"Nope," responded Jeremy, "I ain't gonna say that no more."

At that moment, as I heard Mr. Berry's spluttering rage, I realized the steam coming out of Elmer Fudd's ears when he chased Bugs Bunny was probably inspired by a real person – and that person may have worked in a junior high school as a home room teacher.

"I ain't gonna say that no more." Words to live by from my childhood best friend.

You see, Jeremy wasn't being spiteful or indignant. His intent was genuine. What I understand now, as I look back on that oh-so-fateful afternoon, was that this word had become so ingrained in Jeremy's vocabulary that it was all but insignificant. It was just something that filled space, and writing the word 200 more times on the blackboard only infused his speech with it still deeper.

The word's import – its *meat* was stripped away, even its grisly edges – so that only dry *chalky* (yes, chalky) bone was left... Void of the sustaining nutrients language can and should have.

That's not an indictment on Jeremy; instead, it's a commentary on the words we use without thinking – on our social and religious discourse where reality is dichotomized – bifurcated by the incessant polarization of a push-pull, right-wrong, right-left environment we exist in.

When I stand back and look at the ways we talk to each other – or even worse, *about* one another, I wonder why the words often carrying the most significance are the ones weighed down with hate, bigotry – words that dig into your gut, burrowing like a twisting parasite; words you actually feel when they hit you. These are the words, sometimes names cast about in ignorant contempt that you can't tolerate hearing, and that bounce around in your head for days when you do... words meant to be the linguistic penitentiaries spoken when individuals or groups need to be kept locked up – 'kept in their place.'

Barbara Brown Taylor, who visited this congregation a short time ago, writes, "...the most dangerous word God ever says is *Adam*. All by itself it is no more than a pile of dust – nothing to be concerned about, really – but by following it with the words for *image* and *dominion*, God sifts divinity into that dust, endowing it with things that belong to God alone. When God is through with it, this dust will bear the divine likeness. When God is through with it, this dust will exercise God's own dominion – not by flexing its muscles but by using its tongue..." She continues, "Up to this point in the story, God has owned the monopoly on speech. Only God has had the power to make something out of nothing by saying it is so. Now in this act of shocking generosity, God's stock goes public. 'So God created humankind in the divine image...' – human beings endowed by God with the power of the Word..."

I remember a Sunday three or four years ago when Tim told us he never really liked that adage, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, [but names will never hurt me].” Because it’s the names, Tim said, that get stuck in your head and risk changing your perception of yourself. They’re the names that others call you that eventually make you believe things that aren’t true. They’re the names that often corroborate the things you like least about yourself, even when corroboration doesn’t equal truth or accuracy.

I remember looking at my hands, as Tim spoke, and seeing physical scars I had no memory of receiving. Yet, I can name every bully that picked on me, and exactly what they called me, even after thirty plus years. For so long, I lived by those words: words carved out of cold stone and hurled by some bully, words that became synonymous with my name when I heard them.

And still I wonder: why does it seem like all the words that carry physical weight are the awful ones aimed at the other?

The prophet Amos says, “The time is surely coming, our God declares, when I will send a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing *words*” – words of goodness, mercy, joy – “God’s words” of hope and rightness and abundance.

A famine is coming. Or perhaps it’s already here.

The notion of this famine gives me pause as I reflect on our scripture this morning. The passage begins with three verses that were also in last week’s lectionary passage – words about drinking blood and eating flesh – words that inspired one of my seminary friends to title her sermon “Vampires, Zombies, and Cannibals, oh my!”

As we read further in the passage, Jesus says, “The flesh is useless; it is the *spirit* that gives life.”

Despite what he’s just said about eating his flesh, he almost immediately disregards the actuality of what he’s suggesting – the physical eating. Because in the very same verse he goes on to say, “The *words* I have spoken to you are *spirit and life*.”

At the end of the passage, when Jesus asks if the disciples will leave, Peter answers, “No, teacher, because you have the words of eternal life.”

Remember that in John’s gospel, he likes using the phrase, “the Word.” In the first verse of the first chapter, John writes, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” But in the first chapter, and throughout his gospel, John uses the Greek philosophical term *logos* when he writes about ‘the Word.’

In this passage in chapter six, a different Greek phrase is used, which means simply ‘words’ or ‘sayings’ – without the heavy philosophical baggage and straight up nerdery that *logos* carries.

There will be a famine on the land; not a famine of bread, or a thirst for water, but of hearing words...

Jesus’ sayings, the ways he speaks to people, the ways he teaches and interacts: these are not the only sustenance we receive from him. They are also the nourishment we pass on when the world around us experiences famine – a famine of words, a famine of edifying (even polite) discourse, a famine of expressing love and respect.

This by no means diminishes our obligation to offer physical bread to those who hunger, but it reminds us that in order to offer it, we must be able to also offer greeting to the neighbor with whom we share it.

In my own spiritual life, I experience a famine of words when I pause to pray. Which is why I found myself so terrified during my interview to become a pastor here when Tim asked how I go about praying. [Thank you, Tim!]

It's like this... When I was six years old, my father was working on his PhD. He went into his office to get some papers one evening and I decided to wait for him outside. It was a holiday break and there weren't any students around for me to pester, so I bored quickly. I entered the building and hopped on the elevator to go up to his office. I pressed the button, the doors slid coolly closed, the elevator began to ascend. What I guess to have been half way up to his floor, the elevator stopped and the lights went out.

Alone, in the dark, I was filled with terror. What began as a low moan in my gut finally emerged from my lips as a scream for help.

It must have been only a few seconds that I wailed in that tiny metal box, but it was long enough for me to fall to my knees and start clawing at the doors – uttering that loan word over and over again at the top of my lungs: “Help.” Eventually my dad heard me, even from a few floors up. He simply pressed the call button, and the elevator lights came back on, and it finished its ascent.

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I'm pretty sure we took the stairs back down.

What I told Tim during that interview was that prayer for me is the moment I find the strength to use that word “Help,” no matter how vulnerable it makes me.

What occurred to me, as I reflected on this memory, was that indeed there are those words that hold within them a breadth and depth that give them dimensions, weight.

Often, before Wednesday Night Dinner, we recall Meister Eckhart's reflection, "If the only prayer you offer is [thank you], it will be enough."

'Help' and 'Thanks...' Perhaps inspired by Meister Eckhart (and certainly inspired by me), Anne Lammott wrote that little book in which she includes 'Wow,' as an expressive and expansive word to use in prayer.

You see, it doesn't take much to craft something weighty and beautiful.

You know, if you ask Siri, she estimates the English language now has 1.2 million words, (including new ones like twerk, selfie, crowdfunding, and – heaven help us – turducken). Yet the King James Bible, with its flowing poetic style used just 6,000 different words. Maybe that's in part because the translator was only able to come up with one pronoun for God... but I digress...

If we choose to, we can say a lot, by saying a little. We know that's the case because of some of those awful words I referenced at the beginning of this sermon. You might say that as Baptists, we're a people of few words – with the exception of some of our pastors, perhaps. We have no creeds and no statements that we must adopt in order to become Baptist.

So, when I think about this community and words that we live by, I immediately think of Craig Darling using the word, 'Imagine.' I can hear him say it in this moment. The way that he frames makes me believe that by imagining hope, by imagining joy, we initiate, we spark the divine's healing touch in our lives.

When I think about this community and the words we live by, I think of David Kile saying, "Well, I remember..." That word 'remember' is filled with the magnitude of

who we have been – an institutional memory that informs who we are, and provides the momentum thrusting us into who we’re becoming.

When I think of this community and the words we live by, I think of Patricia inviting us to prayer. In prayer, she reminds us that this is all dialogue – that God is not smaller than our problems, and not too big to bring our concerns and thanksgiving to.

When I think about this community and words that we live by, I think of those times I hear Tim call Patrick ‘beloved...’ When he says it, the way he forms the word, sounds like a embrace you can feel.

These words carry weight all on their own.

If we open ourselves to their power, these words that caress our souls. These words and others like them heal us, help us, and give us hope.

When you hear these words... Oh, when you hear them, do not harden your hearts...