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The Power of Words

(Mark 1:21-28 NRSV) "They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, he entered the synagogue and taught. 22 They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. 23 Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, 24 and he cried out, "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God." 25 But Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be silent, and come out of him!" 26 And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him. 27 They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, "What is this? A new teaching--with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." 28 At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee."

I have always thought that one of the silliest sayings that I know is this: "sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." Anyone who has lived for very long has had the experience of saying something that hurt somebody, something that he wishes he could take back. Every one of us has also had the experience of having something said to us – maybe ten, twenty, fifty years ago – the memory of which still is tender to the touch when we recall it. We may indeed forgive those who have said something hurtful to us, but the very reason that such things **need** forgiveness is that they do indeed hurt. Sometimes a lot. Sometimes for a long, long time. And yet, oddly enough, there are lots of such sayings that seem to devalue the power and the effect of words: "Put your money where your mouth is." Or "Actions speak louder than words." Or Teddy Roosevelt's oft-quoted phrase, "Walk softly but carry a big stick." Now some of these phrases are indeed reminders that it is a virtue not to be hypocritical, that it is indeed good to have what you *do* be consistent with what you *say*. But when such phrases cause us to think that our words are relatively unimportant or lacking in power, then we need to be reminded that that is just not true. The Bible, for one, offers a rather different perspective; the Bible knows that words do have incredible power. The writer of the Gospel of John builds his entire story of Jesus around the metaphor of Jesus' being "the Word." Or when

God is shown creating the world in the first two chapters of Genesis, how is it done? With a word: “Let there be light.” If you remember the prophet Ezekiel’s vision in the valley of the dried bones, what does God tell him to do? To speak a *word* to those bones that they might live.

No, the Bible does not think that “talk is cheap,” or that words are unimportant compared to actions. The witness of our faith and the witness of the Bible is that indeed the careful and caring use of language, of words, is not just a luxury, not just some sort of icing on the cake, but is in fact **crucial** to understanding who God is and what we are called to be and to do. Now, why is this so? Well, let me name three things about the very nature of *words* that can tell us something of our faith, and along the way we will see how our scripture reading from the gospel of Mark is an excellent example of why, indeed, the careful and caring use of words is so important to the mission that God has for us.

The first thing about the nature of words may sound a little abstract, but it’s really not, and that is this: Oftentimes, words don’t just *describe* reality, words in fact **create** reality! One philosopher, in fact, has noticed that there is a whole bunch of things that you can say that, while they may look like simple descriptions, are in fact what brings something into being.¹ When I, at the end of a wedding ceremony, I say the words “*I now pronounce you husband and wife*” this is not just a *description* of what I’m saying; no, the very **saying** of these words in fact **creates** the reality of the marriage! Or when the jury foreman says the words “*We find the defendant guilty*” the very saying of the words themselves **creates** the reality that the defendant is now one convicted of a crime. You can think of other examples, no doubt. The child who at an early age gets labeled with the word “bad” sometimes, as we all have seen, begins to seem to try to live up to that label.

¹J.L. Austin’s notion of “performative language” as found in his book How to Do Things with Words. Cf. also, e.g., <http://rhetorica.net/speech.htm>

Because the word is not just a description, but, as it gets passed along, it actually changes the child's world. People tend to respond to her as if she were "bad" – and that, of course, too often helps assure that indeed she will be! So in this case, the word has not just described her, but used carelessly, has helped to create her, has helped decide who she is and will be.

Second point. All of this means, of course, that words do indeed have an incredible power. *"Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me"* is just plain silly, just plain wrong. When our son Andrew was a toddler, he would sometimes have a really bad day. And he would get frustrated about something; something would be the straw that broke the camel's back and he would have had it. And he would get, as one of our other children used to charmingly call it, "exaggerated," and since Andrew was never very verbal, instead he would start rocking and crying and sort of moaning. And we never were sure what exactly was wrong. And our response to him was, "Andrew, use your **words**, use your **words**." In order to deal with whatever had finally gotten to him, he needed to be able to name it, not just for us, but for himself. The power to name things is indeed important and crucial. The ability to use words to give things a "shape" is something powerful that we take for granted. How many of you have had that experience of having some kind of indeed nameless anxiety? Maybe it makes you not sleep well, or be more irritable than you want to be, or more distant from other people. And yet when you could indeed put a name to what that anxiety was about, it didn't go away but it did become easier to face, deal with, and understand. Words indeed have power.

A third point about the nature of words, and one that is implicit, really, in what has been said already: words can transform lives. But "transform" is one of those words that we need to be careful of. Because words can indeed transform people's lives in good

ways **or** terrible ones. And that brings us back to our scripture's story for today, because it is precisely about how a life can be transformed in good ways. And it is a call to *us* to be and to act in certain ways, and to use *our* words to help God transform for the good lives which are hurting. The man in Mark's story was hurting; we don't know what his problem, medically, was. And while "demon" language, "possession" language, is not language that we use, it **was** the language of Mark's and Jesus' day – and, actually, I think it still conveys something very powerful. Because, look around you – or maybe even look within yourself: you will indeed see all kinds of things that could in fact well be called "possessions." Not far from our doorsteps are people possessed by loneliness, people possessed by fear. People possessed by dread; people possessed by a gnawing sense of futility. People possessed by and wrestling with the demons of illness, crisis, doubt. People possessed by an addiction. People wrestling with the demons of, as one songwriter put it, too little money and too much month.²

As I have said on more than one occasion before, every story in the Bible can and should be interpreted by asking three things: what it says about God, what it says about us, and what we are supposed to do about it! And here I think the answer is clear: What this story invites and calls us to "do about it" is to attempt to speak our own saving words wherever they are needed. To reach out our hands and our voices and our words to help break through those things that are possessing people. To speak the gospel to those whose lives are hurting.

And yet, I would warn you and warn myself: we must be careful not to have the wrong expectations. Sometimes our attempts to speak a saving word, a word of hope, will fail. Our words may not always work; we may not be understood; we may not be heard;

²I've taken license here with Marty Stuart's song "Too Much Month," where he actually writes "There's too much month at the end of the money."
<http://www.cowboylyrics.com/lyrics/stuart-marty/too-much-month--11569.html>

we may not be listened to. It just may not be the time when someone possessed by whatever is haunting them is ripe for transformation and change. And each of us has indeed had that frustrating experience of having our words seem to fall on fallow ground, of ringing hollow. But, my friends, that should never discourage you or me from continuing to try, and to never get stuck on thinking we have to have the “perfect” words. Because it won’t happen. Even Jesus himself had the experience of finding His words ineffective. The gospels honestly report that some who heard him turned away. But Jesus continued to speak and show people what was possessing them and what the life abundant could be like – because it was urgent. Lives were hurting. People were possessed by things that stunted their ability to have a good life, full of purpose and promise. And sometimes indeed, as in our story for this morning, those words of hope and healing worked and worked well and powerfully and to the glory of God.

It is the same for us. I invite you to think about a time in your own life when words have **not** failed, when a word of hope was exactly what someone spoke to you exactly when you needed it. A word that caused the demons that were haunting and tormenting you to flee. Was it someone saying in the midst of struggle “You can do it”? Was it someone quietly telling you, when you’d really messed up, “I love you anyway!”? Or was it someone who, when life was a muddle and a mess, said “You know, you don’t have to live that way; God wants better for you”? Cast about in your own minds and hearts and memories and I know you will find those times when indeed words of healing and hope transformed you in some way large or small and began to free you from whatever was possessing and bedeviling you.

Aren’t you glad, very glad, for those times and occasions? For those words? I think it is out of such memories and out of gratitude to God for the spirit which moved someone to speak those words that we find our mission as individuals and as a church. As we

continue to minister to one another and to the folks outside these doorsteps who are hurting, the folks out there who sadly have come to think that the word church means “banal, bigoted, and boring,” the folks out there who need to know that God loves every person He has made and that families come in all shapes and forms, the question I would hope that we would keep always in front of us is “What reality are we creating with our words?” Because that is indeed what we are doing in and from this place. We are trying to create an alternative to a culture that offers so many, many opportunities for folks to get possessed by things that do not satisfy, that do not give hope, that are empty calories for hurting souls. If the culture says that more and more stuff is what life is about, we will instead offer a saving word that says that true happiness is found in God’s promises of life abundant and eternal. If the culture too often says that meanness and even selfishness are things to be admired, we will instead offer a saving word that is an alternative that shows and demonstrates how lives of self-giving love are the kinds of lives that are truly at peace. If the culture too often says that suspicion and fear of folks who aren’t like me are prudent and wise virtues, we will instead speak a saving word that demonstrates that God’s family knows no bounds of race or class or color or economic status or orientation. In the ministries that we undertake, in the advertising that we do, in the lives that we try to live we can and will seek to speak a saving word to a world around us that is hurting and too often possessed by too many kinds of demons.

There is a Disciples church in a small town in Indiana that has a certain reputation. I was once in a restaurant in that town and I heard the folks in the next booth talking about the church. And one of said this “*Oh, **that** church. You know, they’ll take **anybody** there.*” And although the man saying it said it dismissively and disgustedly, I was rather proud. For the word on the street of that small town evidently was that this church was the place to be if you were hurting, this church was the place to be if you weren’t sure you quite fit

anywhere, this church was the place to be if you didn't have your life totally together, this church was the place to be if you had questions about God and faith and sometimes doubted. The word on the street of that small town – made so by the **words** of those church members – was indeed a saving word. May prayer this morning is this: May it be so with us as we continue with **our** words to be such a church, to offer that kind of hope, to transform lives to the glory of God and for the sake of the Christ who indeed “takes anybody” and who wants everyone to know lives that are abundant.³

³While the general concept for this sermon is based on one I preached at Stilesville Christian Church, Stilesville, Indiana, August 26, 1990, this sermon went in a very different direction. I also know that a few of the ideas in both this sermon and that earlier one are based on a sermon I read when in seminary but do not now recall the author. I would be delighted to give a fuller citation for those ideas if anyone reading this should know.