

JUST WORDS

John 4:1-30, 39-42; Third Sunday in Lent, a

March 27, 2011

Stephen R. Montgomery

Idlewild Presbyterian Church

Prayer: Startle us, O God, with your truth and open our hearts and our minds to your wondrous love. Speak your word to us: silence in us any voice but your own and be with us now as we turn our attention, our minds and our hearts, to you, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

You don't have to push very hard in our culture to recognize that we live in a society that does not trust words very much. Words can be cheap, weaselly things. You can use words to distort, to flatter, to conceal, to deceive. We don't like words, we like substance. When a politician gives a speech, what do we say? "Yeah, promises, promises." When the washing machine repair man says, "I'll be by on Thursday at 2:00, you can count on it." We don't. We didn't just start our third war last week, we are enforcing a no-fly zone. There are no civilian casualties, there is collateral damage. Words, weaselly words. Give us some substance!

As Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady* says to her two suitors, "Words, words, words. Is that all you blighters know how to do? Don't talk of stars burning above, if you're in love, show me!"

Our distrust of words is nothing new. In fact, it is as old as time. Things were going well in the garden of Eden until there was a suspicion raised about the veracity of words. The serpent raised the possibility that words may not be all that they seem. Did God say you will die? Did God say you will not die? Whatever else we lost in the Garden — our innocence, our virtue — whatever else we lost in the Garden, we lost our language.

God gave us words to build relationships of love, to build communities of trust and righteousness. And after the Garden, men and women became liars. "Where is your brother" "I can't recall at this point in time." "Where is your sister?" "I do not know. Am I my sister's keeper?"

We are certainly proud of the kind of programs we have here at Idlewild...going out into the community and tutoring and feeding the homeless and playing baseball for inner city kids and providing resources for those down and out and supporting MIFA and the Church Health Center and providing clean water in Ghana and Mexico and showing children from Burundi and Mexico and Binghamton how to grow a garden. That's substance! That's what I brag about to folks out there!

But more and more, I have become convinced that in large measure, the ministry that Idlewild does, is a ministry of words. It's important for us to realize that; that to be redeemed in Jesus Christ is to get our language back. The possibility of using words in ways that are full of grace

and truth; words that point to justice. Just words. And I think that might be part of the story we read just a little while ago about Jesus and the woman at the well.

I mean, when you ask yourself, “what did Jesus do for that woman?” He did not heal her of any disease. He did not raise her child from the dead. He did not walk on water and dazzle her into faith. I mean, when you get right down to it, all Jesus did for that woman was talk to her. Words. Just words.

But the words He used were so unlike all the other words she had heard. They transformed her. Words of grace and truth. Now look, it is important, I think, to note that this story does not begin with words. In fact, quite to the contrary, it begins in silence.

But there is a little detail, a little surprising nuance with multiple meanings that sets the stage. You might not have even noticed it when I read it. I didn’t for about 20 years. “He *had* to go through Samaria.” Well, if you have one of those beautifully colored maps in the back of your bible, you’ll see that Jesus is in Judea, and that he doesn’t *have* to go through Samaria to get to Galilee. It seemed to be the most direct route, but Jews didn’t go through Samaria — too many centuries of alienation and hostility, too much animosity, too many unclean people. But John tells us he *had* to go. I wonder why.

And the story then begins in silence. Jesus has come to the old landmark, Jacob’s well; and he is resting there. A Samaritan woman comes from the town to draw water at the well. And there is silence — not a tranquil, peaceful silence, not a gentle silence — but a hard, cold, stony silence because she who came to the well was a woman. He who rested at the well was a man. She who came to the well was a Samaritan; he who rested at the well was a Jew. And between Samaritan women and Jewish men there was a wall of silence — built brick by brick, through racial and religious and sexual prejudice through the generations. Hatred and fear, through which no word was allowed to pass. “Would you give me a drink of water?” said the Jewish man to the Samaritan woman, and the wall came tumbling down. One phrase, one gentle word, “Would you give me a drink of water?” and the wall came tumbling down.

It is astounding to me how often the ministry of the church is a rather gentle word. Oh, occasionally there is a showdown with Caesar, to be sure; but most of the time, the ministry of the church is a gentle word laid out there, cutting against the cultural grain. Like the word spoken in 1955, that became a word of ministry to all of us—when a bus driver in Montgomery, Alabama told four people in the center of the bus they were going to have to move to the back. And one of them, a tired department store worker named Rosa Parks spoke so softly they said you could barely hear her voice above the sound of the bus motor. And all she said was “No....no.” One word, and the wall came tumbling down.

Will Willimon, a Methodist bishop, tells about a parishioner he had when he was in South Carolina named Ann. Ann was a student in pharmaceutical school, and occasionally, she would come home for the weekend to visit her parents. And, when she did, she would come to church. After

one such visit, that Sunday evening, Will got a telephone call from Ann's father. "Will, we received a very disturbing call from our Ann. She's gone back to school, and I needed to tell you about it. She's considering dropping out of pharmacy school." "Why is she doing that?" said Will. "I have no idea," said her father. "But she respects you very much, would you call her and talk some sense into her?"

He agreed to do it so the next morning he gave her a call. "Ann, what's this I hear? You know you've worked hard to get where you are. I can't imagine why you are doing this." "Well," she said, "it was your sermon yesterday. You said that God calls us to places of service and sacrifice. And it dawned on me that I am not in such a place. I am doing this for myself and my parents. I remembered that summer I spent in the church's literacy program with migrant farm workers. That's when I felt alive to the service of God. I think I want to give my life to that." There was a long silence on the other end of the phone. And then Will said, "Now, Ann, I was just preaching." One word, and the wall came tumbling down.

When the wall fell down between Jesus and the woman, I think it frightened her. You can tell that from the conversation. She responds with a flurry of words as if she's trying to build the wall back up. You know there is something comforting about a wall; it hems you in, but you don't have to deal with what's on the other side of it. But beneath the words of this woman, Jesus hears the woman. Beneath the harangue, He hears the human being. "*Why is this, that you a Jew, ask of me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?*" "If you knew who was asking, you would have been free to ask, and I would have given you living water." "*Where are you going to get this water; you haven't even got a bucket — even Jacob had to have a bucket to get water out of the well!*" "I'm not talking about water out of this well; I'm talking about living water."

That's when the woman said the fatal word, the word that caused her death and gave her life, "*Give me this living water.*" "All right, go get your husband and bring him here." "*I have no husband.*" "That's right. You've spoken the truth. You have no husband. You've had five husbands, and the man you're living with now, he's not your husband. You've said the truth." A lot of people have raised eyebrows about this part of the conversation — five husbands, she's had five husbands, the man she's living with now is not her husband, as if somehow she were a merry divorcee trading in husbands like sports cars, the Liz Taylor (may she rest in peace!) of ancient Samaria, something like that!

Women in the first century didn't have that kind of power. She has not been devouring husband after husband after husband; she has been devoured by a social system that, for whatever reason, has moved her from man to man to man and now gotten her to the place that she does not even have the dignity of marriage. She is, in her cultural context, worthless. And when Jesus says "You've had five husbands," he's not exposing her scandal; He's touching her wound with His word.

The ministry of the church is to touch the broken places with the word. Tom Long tells of a former student of his who graduated from seminary; she was called to be the pastor of a small

Presbyterian church, small enough so that she set for herself the goal of visiting every member on the roll within the first six months. At the end of six months, she had done it. Visited every family on the roll except one. The session said “Don’t go; they haven’t been here in a couple of years. They’re not coming back; it’s a waste of time.” She had her goal, however. And so one afternoon, she drove out to visit them.

Only the woman was at home. She poured mugs of coffee, and they sat at the kitchen table to talk. They talked about this. They talked about that. Then they talked about IT. A little over two years before she had been vacuuming in the back of the house while their young son played in the den. She hadn’t checked on him for awhile. She snapped off the vacuum cleaner, went into the den — he wasn’t there. She followed his path across the den, through the patio door, across the patio to the swimming pool, where she found him.

At the funeral, she said “The people in the church were very kind. They said it was God’s will.” The young minister put her coffee cup down on the table. Should she touch it, or should she not? She touched it. “ I’m sure the people at the church meant well. But they were wrong.” “What do you mean?” “It isn’t the will of God to take the life of children.” “Well, then, who do you blame? I suppose you blame me,” she said — her jaw set, her face reddening. “No, I don’t blame you, that’s not what I’m saying. I just don’t think we ought to blame God.” “Well then, explain it to me; you explain it to me!” “I can’t explain it; I just know that God’s heart broke when yours did.”

The woman folded her arms. It was clear that the conversation was over. And when the young minister left, she was kicking herself. “Why didn’t I leave it alone?” A couple of days later, however, the woman called and said, “My husband and I would like for you to come back out here. We don’t know where this is going, but we have thought for two years that God was angry at us, and we now wonder if it is the other way around.” With a word, she touched the wound.

When Jesus touched the wound, the woman became genuinely frightened. “I see,” she said, “that you are a prophet, and I think I’d like to change the subject. Isn’t it fascinating how we Samaritans worship in Mount Gerazim; you Jews worship at the temple in Jerusalem. Isn’t that a fascinating distinction between Samaritans and Jews!” “Oh woman,” He said, “the time is coming, and now is, when the mount and in the temple, it won’t matter. What will matter to God is YOU and your worship in spirit and truth.” “Me matter to God? Yeah, some day — when hell freezes over, when the Messiah comes.”

That’s when Jesus offered the best word of all, “I AM HE.” I am He, the One whose word destroys the walls that hem you in. I am He. I am He, the One whose word touches your wound. I AM HE. I am He, the One who stands beside you giving your life. I am He. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God, and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. I AM HE.” And that woman received a Word and had a Word to speak and live.

And that woman, that worthless, no-count, outcast of a woman, became the first evangelist in the Gospel. She went into the city and told others about this man who touched her with a word ... a word of grace and truth.

“I baptize you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,” we say to little Lucinda. Just words, but if we live into those words she will grow up in a community hearing words of grace and truth, knowing that she is beloved of God. Admittedly she has a head start because she has already heard those words from her parents.

But what about those who haven't heard a word that might touch a wound? Remember that sentence at the very beginning of the story? “Jesus *had* to go through Samaria.” No he didn't. It made no sense. But there were people yearning for a word that he had to offer. He went to them.

And so a young man moves to Memphis; finds a place in mid-town. He drives by a big, concrete Gothic-styled structure on Union Avenue. “I wonder what kind of word I would hear there,” he thinks to himself as he remembers the words that were directed at him in other churches ... words of judgment, words of hostility, words that led him out of the church. And he drives on by.

Think we should go to Samaria? Jesus *had* to. What do you think?

Amen.

© 2011 Idlewild Presbyterian Church (USA), Memphis TN