

“Walking the Way of Faith: The Power of Words”

Mary Henderson Bowman

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Our Scripture readings¹ this morning remind us of the life-giving and death-inflicting power that words have... the power for deep good and the power for deep harm.

When used negatively, words can be like an incendiary bomb. James compared the tongue to a blazing fire.

How much more damaging when the words are infused with negative feelings?

Words can carry hate and ill-intent. Words can enflame fear. Words can cut and maim like a knife. Words are used to spread gossip, to tell lies, to spread hatred, to unfeelingly criticize, to puff up some while putting others down, to shame and blame, and the list could go on.

But Proverbs and James also acknowledge that words can be used for good. On the positive side, our words have the power to give encouragement, to offer praise, to express love, to offer healing, to build bridges, to make manifest our prayers, to provide forgiveness, to extend reconciliation, and to pronounce blessing. Our Old Testament reading likened words to a life-giving well. Words have the ability to bring wholeness and healing to the spaces once owned by pain.

When I was a little girl and I would get taunted by the bullies at school, I was taught to use a recitation against them . . . one that may be familiar to you . . .

“Stick and stones may break my bones, but names — or words — can never hurt me.”

I must confess that I always felt better after saying it . . .

but if I am honest, I think my sense of feeling better had more to do with having the last word before running off and less to do with the actual effectiveness of the phrase itself.

If we hold that phrase up to our adult selves, I think we would all agree — because we each know firsthand — that words actually can hurt quite a bit. In fact, the sting of words and their effect can be felt for a lifetime.

The reality is that the words we say to each other can get buried deep inside of us and continue to exert their power years (and years) after they were said. It is as though a sharp shard gets embedded and an infected wound grows around it. Unless we find a way to exact the shard — along with the lie that it likely contained — we will never really heal from what was said.

The best description that I have heard regarding the damage of words came to me in a story that I read.

The story told about a father who heard that his son had been cruel with his words. The father took his son out to their backyard where there was a wooden fence with sturdy posts. The father instructed his son to

¹ Proverbs 10:11-14, 12:13-20 | The Message; James 3:1-12 | The Message

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drive ten nails into one of the fence posts. When the boy finished, the father told him that whenever anyone speaks hateful words, the words are like sharp nails going into someone’s soul. Then the father instructed the boy to pull all of the nails out. As you can imagine, this was even harder than hammering them in. When the boy finally finished, his father asked his son to look at the holes that were left by the nails. The father explained that even if we take out the nails by apologizing to someone for what we said, there is still damage that takes time to heal. Words leave their mark.

And let’s be honest, it is one thing for us to take on the insults of other children. It is something else entirely to deal with criticism from adults.

Criticism like . . .

“I really don’t understand why you can’t be more like your sister.”

“What made you think that a “B” would be acceptable?”

“I will never forgive you for this..”

“I can see that you will never amount to much.

When we are young, we do not have the ability to separate a person’s words from our sense of self. When we are young and criticized by adults, we do not have the ability to determine the truth of what is being said or what the motives are — either good or bad. Instead, an adult’s criticism simple gets registered as an evaluation of us and a failure on our part.

We absorb the words — usually lies — as a condemnation of who we are.

We take in the message that we are not acceptable as we are.

We absorb shame and feel like we are not enough.

The dart of words pierces us and we do not feel valuable or worthy or understood.

And usually this causes us to change ourselves so we can avoid another dart.

But the wound remains.

I confess I would like the story about the father and the son better if the father took the time to re-fill the holes that were caused by the nails.

For us to be truly healed by the wounds of words, it is true that the nails need to be removed — but the open wound also needs to be healed.

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In my own experience, the best way to heal such wounds is to bring them to God in prayer and ask for help to heal.

Sometimes we can remember the worst things said to us. Sometimes they are so buried that we need God to remind us that they are there so they can come to the surface and back into our consciousness to be healed.

In God’s eyes, we are beloved. God does not define us by the worst things said about us or the worst things we have done. We are not perfect, like God — and so we will make mistakes, but God does not define us by those mistakes. God knows that we are growing into one degree of glory to the next.

I really love that Jesus came to humankind as a healer.

Healing is so critical to the work that Jesus does.

And Jesus comes to us still as a healer.

We read in the Bible that Jesus performed physical miracles, but Jesus is also concerned about inner healing — spiritual and emotional healing. Jesus wants us to be made whole as the person we were made to be.

Jesus is always inviting us to follow Him . . . can we go in trust to be healed in the deeper parts of ourselves?