

## **Word Power**

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield  
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 19, Year B  
September 13, 2009

“Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me.”

Wrong.

This chant, popular among younger children (at least when I was young), is supposed to be a retort to bullies who call others names. It is meant to indicate that the words aimed at them have no power, they have no effect on the recipient. And if that phrase helps someone get through an ugly playground exchange without further incident, that’s great.

However, I think it would be safe to say that we know the power of words—the power of speech, the power of the written word. They spark revolutions, overturn governments, bring about change—or keep the status quo. Words can comfort, inspire, anger, shame. As a culture, we use the spoken word to almost exhausting degree—television news shows, talk shows, debates, speeches; we listen to the spoken word in classrooms, lecture halls, churches, government meetings. The written word enables words to be shared over distances and over time, communicating ideas and information and creative works to a broader audience than can be reached in one location at one moment in time. Words, language, has immense power.

Words and language can have damaging effects as well as uplifting ones. Ranging from playground taunts and name-calling to verbal abuse to slander, words can be used to destroy. They can indeed inflict more harm than any sticks or stones—and if you ask someone whose career or marriage or family has been irreparably harmed by lies and rumor or someone who has

### **Word Power**

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield  
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 19, Year B  
September 13, 2009

lost all sense of self-esteem due to hateful and hurtful things being told to them on a continuous basis, they probably would have preferred the broken bones.

The writer of James was well aware of this when writing his Epistle. He knew the power of words, and how carelessly we wield them like a weapon. And while it seems that he refers to the tongue as ‘restless evil’, it is not physical body part he is so concerned with—but rather the words that fly out of our mouths. We can strive to have only holy thoughts so that have no chance of slipping up—but I don’t think James expects that. However, we are expected to have enough self-control to realize that we need not share every thought that pops into our heads.

This is something that usually comes with age (slip-ups by a certain congressman during a presidential address notwithstanding)—and it also comes with the knowledge and appreciation for the power of words—and faith that God loves and cherishes each of us the same, and wishes us to build one another up and not tear one another down. Gossip, rumors, lies and innuendoes all do nothing to build up the kingdom of God, the body of Christ. We owe it to one another and to our Lord to think before we speak.

Peter found that out the hard way. Peter often spoke impulsively—sometimes in a good way, and others not. He led with his heart, and that is probably one of the reasons why Jesus called him. So when Jesus asked the disciples that very personal question: “Who do YOU say that I am?”, Peter’s heart could hold the truth no longer and out it came: “You are the Messiah”. There is no mention that anyone disagreed with Peter—and neither did Jesus. That simple sentence,

### **Word Power**

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield  
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 19, Year B  
September 13, 2009

now out in the open, was powerful. It gave life and shape to the disciples' hopes and dreams—dreams of a free Jewish nation, hopes for a life where peace and justice reigned.

So when Jesus started talking about undergoing suffering and rejection and death (and resurrection), it threw them all off guard. None of this fit with where the disciples saw Jesus' mission going. There were no words about freedom or glory or a new nation. I imagine that the disciples were confused by Jesus' words, disturbed by them, perhaps starting to question that which had just been confessed—that Jesus is Messiah. So Peter, trying to do this quietly, took Jesus aside, and disagreed with him. You can only imagine Peter's words: "Jesus, look, you're really getting the guys upset. Everything is going great, so many people are with you. How can you think that you're going to wind up suffering at the hands of our authorities? Why, we can gather a whole army of people who will support you—we can go all the way to Jerusalem and drive out the Romans and make things right! Why all this talk of rejection and suffering and death? C'mon Jesus..."

Jesus was not unaffected by the power of words either, and these he could perhaps feel pulling at him, tempting him to seek the world's way of doing things rather than God's will. Words that cajoled and sounded all so sensible—taking the popular route, seeking the short term gain. It would be all too easy...and that's why Jesus reacted so strongly to Peter's rebuke. For Peter's words were soothing, were tempting, but Jesus knew that God's way was not the world's way—and Jesus could not, would not, live any other but God's way even if it led to the suffering and

**Word Power**

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield  
The Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 19, Year B  
September 13, 2009

death. The world's way would lead to a kingdom of this world, not a kingdom in and beyond it; it would come to an end, a death—and not lead to everlasting life.

For Jesus to lead all of us to everlasting life, he had to deny himself and take up the cross and be willing to submit his will to God so that others can be saved. It was a labor of love like no other, and yet he would have it no other way. Jesus only asks that we too embrace that labor of love as well—to be willing to live the way God calls us to live, to not be trapped by the soothing and 'sensible' words that too often rule our lives, telling us to take the easier, popular, safer road through life. Instead he asks us to do the very risky thing of losing our life—giving up having our own way—so that through us, the world may know the face and love and character of God.

Jesus knew the power of words, and he used them well. He asks us to do so too—to not be afraid to honor Jesus words in our lives, to speak boldly about our faith to others—to live as He did, never being afraid to speak of the truth of God's saving grace. For in the end, it was sticks of wood and other hard objects that did break Jesus' body—but the words of his opponents did not hurt him.

Indeed, we have all been saved the living Word of God.

Amen.