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First Presbyterian Church
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How Shall They Hear Without a Preacher?

Romans 10:14-15, James 3:1-12

In 1899, four newspaper reporters sat in a tavern in Denver commiserating about a very slow news day. Al Stevens, Jack Tournay, John Lewis and Hal Wilshire represented the four Denver papers: the *Post*, the *Times*, the *Republican*, and the *Rocky Mountain News*. They had met by accident at the train station hoping for some news from the east. But the train bore no celebrity, no visiting dignitaries and no scoop for the next day's paper. So the reporters retired to the Oxford Hotel to have a round of beers.

What could they do? Well, have another round of beers. Maybe they should just make up a story. No, they couldn't do that, could they? Another round of beers. A domestic story would be too easy to check, so what about a story from . . . China. Angles were discussed. Another round of beers. How about saying that China is going to tear down the Great Wall as a symbol of international good will and openness to trade. Another round of beers. By 11:00 p.m. they had the details worked out. Each of the men signed a phony name to the guest register, saying that the names were a delegation from New York who had told them the news.

The next day each Denver newspaper carried the story: GREAT WALL OF CHINA DOOMED! PEKING SEEKS WORLD TRADE. The story circulated around the country and then abroad. When it reached Peking, the word was that an American demolition crew was coming to China to tear down her national treasure. The Chinese were enraged, particularly a secret society already wary of foreign influence. The society exploded and went on a rampage, attacking foreign embassies and missionaries. Six nations moved in to protect their citizens, and the bloodshed that followed became known as . . . the Boxer Rebellion.

This account from Paul Harvey's, "The rest of the story," reminds us of the power of words. We are not only what we eat; we are also what we hear. Words grip our passions and ignite new visions. I can still remember being deeply moved by John F. Kennedy's ringing declaration before the Berlin Wall, "Ich bin ein Berliner." When I visited the *King Center* in Atlanta this January and re-listened to his "I have a Dream" speech" and to the speech he gave in Memphis the night before his assassination which ends with him collapsing in exhaustion after proclaiming, "I've been to the Promised Land," I had tears in my eyes. *The Great Debaters*, starring Denzel Washington, is a powerful portrayal of how the debate team from little Wiley College in Texas goes to Harvard and sways the audience by their passionate oratory.

Words do have awesome power. Words shape our world; they communicate and help us make sense of our lives. What is unexpressed is unattainable. But when an idea is expressed, in thought and then in words, ideas can change our lives, for good or for ill. We're fond of saying that "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." We know that that isn't true. Words can hurt deeply.

Susan Forward in her book, *Toxic Parents*, describes the devastating effects of emotional child abuse, those cutting remarks delivered under the guise of education, humor or guidance. She tells of Vicki, an attractive 34 year old account manager, whose self-esteem was so low that she rejected her firm's offer to pay for her to get an M.B.A. Only after long months of counseling did she see the connection between her fears of advancement and the words she so often heard during her childhood. Vicky relates,

My mom wanted me to be the perfect little lady, and if I'd blow it, she'd shame me into doing it right. She'd imitate me if I mispronounced a word. She'd make fun of how I looked . . . ballet recitals were the worst. One time after I danced wonderfully, she came backstage and roared, "You danced like a hippo." I was crushed. When I cried, she told me that taking criticism was the only way to learn. Then she patted my arm and I thought she was going to say something nice. But what she said was, "But let's face it, dear, you don't do anything very well, do you?"

The words lodged so deeply that Vicky was still convinced, at the age of 34, that she couldn't do anything very well.

Words do have enormous power. They reveal much about who we are. Words are the overflow of our characters. Over time, they reveal our inner essence, fears, attitudes, motivations, and manner of thinking. Sensitive and gracious speech reveals a concern for another's feelings. Gossip shows how we love attention and being "in the know." Profanity often reveals a lack of respect for God and other people. A consistently loose tongue often indicates a loose personality, a person who lacks control, emotional maturity and insight.

Dear Abby is still pondering how to respond to the letter which asked, "Dear Abby, What can I do about all the sex, nudity, fowl language (sic) and violence on my VCR?" Or the young man who asked, "Dear Abby, I joined the Navy to see the world. I've seen it. Now how do I get out?" Or the young woman who wrote, "Dear Abby, I'm a 23 year-old liberated woman who's been on the pill for two years. It's getting expensive, and I think my boyfriend should share half the cost. But I don't know him well enough to discuss money with him." Abraham Lincoln was right, "It's better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to speak out and remove all doubt."

An issue today is the internet. It's so easy to quickly type a response and push, "Forward to all," without realizing that when we're not communicating face-to-face, being sensitive

to body language, facial expression, and vocal intonation, we may be saying something insensitive, untimely or even hurtful.

Because words are so important, Scripture is full of admonitions to guard carefully every word we speak. The ninth commandment declares, "Do not bear false witness." This commandment protects the sanctity of the court, for the rich should not defraud the poor, nor the clever the ignorant. Witnesses and judges are to consider only one thing: what is the truth? The people of God are to reflect God's image and His truthfulness. Truthfulness is a very practical way that we show love for our neighbor.

The Old Testament commands us to speak with care, "The wise in heart accept commands, but a chattering fool comes to ruin." "The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life, but violence overwhelms the mouth of the wicked." "A perverse man stirs up dissension, but gossip separates close friends." Jesus Himself warns, "On the day of judgment you will have to give account for every careless word you have spoken. By your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned." Words not only express our witness, but reveal our inner spirits. Speech does reveal our essence; it is the overflow of our characters; it is integral to our relationships, lives and happiness.

James heaps up image after image expressing the tongue's power. As a horse is controlled by a small piece of metal placed in its mouth, as a large ship is turned by a small rudder, so the tongue, though small, has great power. Words can cause harm, or bring great joy. An impassioned speech can win the day; a meaningful sermon can change lives; words of encouragement can give a struggler the strength to go on.

James reminds us that words can be like the sparks of a fire. As a great forest is set ablaze by one spark, so an idle word can become magnified and distorted until it takes on a life of its own. Animals can be domesticated, but not so the tongue. Remember, says James, words are intended to bless – to be raised in song, to offer worship, to give life and encouragement, to settle disputes, edify, and help us laugh and love. So when we speak, we ask: Is this true? Is this necessary? Is this loving?

First, is it the truth? For some reason, we're tempted to be drawn by the negative and the exaggeration. We know people who have a "keep sense of rumor." Before we pass on the tidbit of gossip, do we know the extenuating circumstances? All the details? Is our source of information accurate?

Second, is it necessary? We may speak the truth, but we can also brutalize others with the truth. Sometimes silence is better than speaking. If we have friends who have a son who just dropped out of college, is it necessary to tell them that our daughter is going to make Phi Beta Kappa? When I was in fourth grade, I took up the trumpet. After about six weeks, the student intern told me, "I don't know how to say this gracefully, but this is frankly a waste of my time and your time." Fortunately the band director called me down to his office and asked me, "Was I practicing?" "Yes." "Was I interested in the trumpet?"

"No, I really wanted to play the drums, but was told the band had enough drummers."
"So what!" said the director. "I want you to play what you want." My parents may not have been pleased with noise, but I admire the band director's initiative. And what a difference in those two conversations.

When we speak, we ask: Is it the truth? Is it necessary? And: is it loving? Louis Evans spoke eloquently when he said, "Human hearts can be like tinder, dry of the milk of human kindness and parched from the lack of the rains of mercy; in such tinder, a blaze can destroy." We all need affirmation and encouragement, words that impart hope and strength; words that, in the words of the Psalmist, are like "a fountain imparting life."

Today we give thanks for the words of one person in particular. Today we celebrate the 55th anniversary of the ordination of Dale Tutje. Dale was ordained during the presidency of Dwight Eisenhower. He was ordained before the internet, so we know his sermons were his own. He was ordained when he had to hunt and peck on the typewriter, rather than using the word processing and spell-check we use today. Dale was ordained when engineers still used slide rules, before Elvis, let alone the Beatles, Rolling Stones or Three Doors Down. He is part of what Tom Brokaw calls, "The Greatest Generation" – a generation of visionaries, community servants, and pillars.

While our text from James refers to the importance of words, in general, our text from Romans speaks of some very special words – the words of the preacher: "How, then, can they call on the One in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe if they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news?"

Paul is validating his call to preach to the Gentiles. Someone has to proclaim the message. Someone has to point the Gentiles towards Jesus. Someone has to interpret life and faith and God's passion that all be redeemed through Jesus Christ. And prior to that, though all of us are called to ministry and mission, someone has to respond to God's call,. Today, we give thanks that Dale responded to God's call and for 55 years has served His Lord with faithfulness and distinction.

As both your ordained and amateur preachers know, it is a great privilege to be called to preach. In times of death, we share the only words that can offer comfort and consolation, "Jesus is the resurrection and the life." As a baby is presented for baptism, we share the amazing grace that a child, before being able to speak or consciously think, is known and loved by her heavenly father. We preside at weddings, break the bread of life at communion, and try, with all of our human frailties and shortcomings, to "harass the comforted and comfort the harassed." Today we honor Dale for 55 years of faithfully proclaiming God's word. And as Dale approaches his 4th or 17th or 24th retirement, we wish Dale and Ginny good health, God's blessings, and abundant thanksgiving.