

Sermon – “Sticks and Stones”

Scripture Readings – Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7, Matthew 4:1-11

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Our first scripture reading is found in Genesis 2:15-17, 3:1-7. In this familiar reading we are reminded once again of the power of words. God created the world through the spoken word in the first chapter of Genesis and now the serpent speaks words to persuade Adam and Eve to disobey God. The serpent only speaks twice, but his speech is cunning, calculated and manipulative. First, the serpent questions what God said. The second time, he contradicts what God says. This narrative sorts out the competing and conflicting voices that seek to define who we are. Hear now the Word of God.

*15 The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. 16 And the Lord God commanded the man, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die."*

*1 Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" 2 The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, 3 but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'" 4 "You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. 5 "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 6 When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. 7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. Amen.*

On this first Sunday in Lent, our second scripture reading is Matthew 4:1-11, Jesus' forty days of fasting and praying in the wilderness and his encounter with Satan immediately following his baptism. The forty days of lent beginning with Ash Wednesday and leading up to Palm Sunday, the start of Holy Week, are symbolic of the forty days Jesus spent preparing for his ministry. This encounter with "the devil, the tempter, Satan," names used interchangeably to refer to the leader of the forces of evil, would define who Jesus is and Jesus' ministry. Once again, we see the power of words in the interaction and Jesus' faithfulness to God's word. Jesus honors the limitations that are a part of his humanity and refuses to use the power he had as God for his personal gratification or glorification. Hear now God's Holy Word.

*1 Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. 2 He fasted forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. 3 The tempter came and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread." 4 But he answered, "It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" 5 Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, 6 saying to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,' and 'On their hands they will bear you up, so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.'" 7 Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" 8 Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; 9 and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." 10 Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.'" 11 Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.*

The title of the sermon: "Sticks and Stones"

*The text: The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But Jesus answered, 'It is written, 'One does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' Matthew 4:3-4*

Let us pray. Holy God, thank you for the gift of words and the power they have in our lives. Give us the wisdom and courage to choose our words wisely, to speak words that empower one another and to speak truth to power. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

*Sticks and stones can break my bones but words will never hurt me.*

Dr. Lee Ann Lyons, who was the principal of Meramec Elementary School in Clayton, Missouri at the time our son Paul attended, began one of her letters to parents with these words. I share some of her reflections on this familiar saying in the context of our scripture readings and I do so acknowledging my gratitude and respect for all the educators within our communities and this congregation who teach our children the importance of words.

*She writes: Sticks and stones can break my bones but words will never hurt me. How many of us have heard this phrase? I feel strongly the opposite is true; words have the power to do irreparable damage. How many of us have gone through life with the memory of a childhood incident that still haunts us as an adult? Words are powerful beyond our realization.*

Dr. Lyons goes on to share her experience of running her first marathon and the power of words along the way that gave her the strength to finish. She had been given the message as a young girl that she could never be an athlete, much less do anything requiring that kind of endurance.

She ran her marathon in Chicago with her son, husband and 34,000 other runners. As she began the race she worked to replace the old childhood messages which were coming into her mind about what she was not capable of doing with positive thoughts. She felt tremendous support as her husband and son ran alongside her. Her son stayed with her through mile eighteen encouraging, cajoling her with thoughtful words and setting the pace. When he moved on, she wondered how she could finish the eight remaining miles by herself.

She put one foot in front of the other and to her delight and surprise; it was the cheers from the crowd along the way that gave her the strength to finish. She was astounded when she heard someone call her *an athlete*. And although she had no idea what the Hispanic children were saying as they did a cheer in Spanish on one of the corners she passed, she knew the words were for her.

Lee Ann made it to mile 24 when she began to walk, actually it was more of a hobble. This is when a beautiful African American woman stepped out in front of her, looked her in the eye and said, *'You go girl, you haven't run this far to give up now!'* She ran the rest of the way to the finish line realizing the power of words and how much the cheering crowds made it possible for her to complete the 26 mile marathon she began that day. If only, she thought we could do this for our children, every day, how far they could go!

And so writes this insightful, wise principal to the parents of the children for whom she was responsible. *Let us cheer our children on and call them names that give them the confidence to run and to not be weary. And let us teach our children to use their words and the power they possess to affirm one another rather than tear each other down. Let us create a place where name calling is a positive experience empowering our children to run just one more mile, building their character and confidence so eventually they can run the marathon of life.*

As we begin another Lenten journey in the marathon of our life together as a community of faith, it is good to be reminded of the power of words and the importance of choosing our words well.

Understanding the power of words is at the heart of our Judeo-Christian faith. Not only did God create the world and humankind through the spoken word but it was the subtle and cunning words of the serpent that led Adam and Eve to forget who they were and who God created them to be.

Life was full of possibilities in the garden; however, life was not without limitations. The serpent, by questioning and contradicting God's word, plants seeds of doubt and mistrust. Eve and Adam choose not to accept the limitation their Creator asks of them. The irony of their choice, their "taking and eating" is that rather than taking in a life without limitations as promised by the serpent, they find themselves shut out of the garden facing untold limitations in the ever expanding wilderness life before them.

In the gospel of John we read that the Word was with God in the beginning creating the world, the Word that was with God and was God became flesh and dwelt among us in Jesus Christ. Lent is a season of accepting the limitations of our humanity, our mortality even as we celebrate a God who joined us in those limitations and who met us in the wilderness of life.

It is in the wilderness where we find Jesus in our gospel reading today. We can't help but recognize the cunning deception in the words Satan speaks to Christ. The human Jesus is exhausted, hungry and weak from his intentional discipline of fasting... of not "taking and eating." By asking Jesus to turn the stones into bread, Satan is tempting him, not unlike the serpent tempted Adam and Eve, to reject the limitations that come with being human and to use the powers he has as the Son of God. The tempter is trying to get Jesus to deny the humanity he took upon himself when he was born into the world as our Savior. The tempter is trying to get Jesus to deny who he is and who God called him to be.

Jesus doesn't turn the stones into loaves of bread to meet the needs of his own hunger but answers Satan with words from Scripture. *'It is written, human beings do not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'*

In each of the three temptations, Jesus responds with words from Scripture, powerful words that remind us who we are and who God calls us to be; words that strengthen us for the marathon of life; and words that we teach our children one mile at a time.

A part of teaching our children to use the power they possess is helping them accept and honor human limitations. No one can have everything they want. By providing limitations and boundaries we help them learn discipline and set limits that empower them to make healthy choices.

We need to teach our children not only to speak words that empower one another but to be the stones that cry out in the abuse of power. When we speak up for those who have no power we remember who we are and who God calls us to be. When we speak truth to power—to the bullies in our schools and the bully pulpits in our society, we remember who we are and who God calls us to be.

As we run the marathon of life together, one mile at a time, may we be encouraged by the cheers along the way and listen for the still, quiet voice of the One who joined us in our humanity and in the wilderness and whose Spirit dwells within our hearts.

May we mount up with wings like eagles;  
May we run and not be weary;

...and may we speak words that give power to the faint and strengthen the powerless. By the grace of God, may it be so. Amen.