

The nursery rhyme lied! Do you remember it? The one we used to tell our children when someone called them a name: “*Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.*” It was/is a lie. Words hurt. They can cause pain, suffering, anguish, torment, even war. Of course, they can also bring hope, joy, gladness, comfort, smiles and peace. I am growing more confident that our youngest grandson will be a writer/storyteller. He has to go into the most minute details when telling what happened or how he did something. Words are important to him. Words, in many ways, have life...they are living words.

Both the Psalmist and John write about the power of words in our Scripture lessons today. They explore the power of God’s words. The 119<sup>th</sup> Psalm and its 176 verses are a celebration of the power of God’s words in the life of the Psalmist. If you examine the Psalm closely you will note that only five (5) of the 176 verses do not speak in some way of the power of God’s word. The writer speaks of Gods laws, statutes, decrees, judgments, commandments, ordinances, precepts and promises in all but five verses. It is these Words that sustain him and give him hope. God’s Word is a guide to his daily living and it protects, keeps him safe and provides “a light to his path.” The Psalm is a celebration of God through the power of Word.

For John, this Word has now come and is alive in our midst. The Word is living among us—John’s Christmas story. John’s powerful image is that the Word is being lived out, demonstrated in our very midst—it is alive through Christ. John is a witness to this “Living Word”. The Scripture has taught us about God and the attributes of God but we have gotten it wrong. Our image of God has become distorted. Now, though, the very presence of God is here in the Living Word. There is something about having the real thing in our midst. We can now know God not because we have heard about God but because God has come and lived among us.

I have praised the book *Penguins, Pain and the Whole She-bang* by John Shore. I have used it in sermons, given it as a gift and encouraged others to buy it. It is a delightful little book about one man’s struggle with faith and with some of the difficult questions often raised about faith answered in a simple, profound way. One day I got an email from John Shore. He had heard from someone that I had used a quote from his book (shuddered at first reading his email—law suit???) and wanted to thank me. I emailed him back and soon discovered that he lived not far from Los Angeles and yes, he would be willing to come and share with us. Now his book is more alive when I read it because I have met him, heard his faith story and now see him in its pages. It is the same with the Gospels. Once we have met the author the Word becomes alive on its pages.

The Gospels give to us the image of God as God lives in our midst. They demonstrate to us what God is really like because the Word is alive in our midst. The world was filled with ideas and theories about what God was like. However, for the most part they were wrong. God is not restricted to one nation or one people. God is not a list of commands or decrees written in stone or on a piece of parchment paper. This is who God really is: God walking the earth, God showing and demonstrating a love and a hope – “if you have seen me, you have seen God” (John 14:9) says Jesus. This is how you should act and live in my name. Remember Paul as he wrote to the Church in Philippi: we should learn how to get along with one another. Paul was living out what the Living Word demonstrated while it was among us in Christ.

We are called to be Living Words. Or, actions speak louder than words. This is in many ways the theme of the Gospels and the book of James. We are admonished to let our

actions go along with our words, our beliefs. It is hard to speak of love while we hate those we are speaking to. It is hard to say “God loves you” and then turn the same people away. It is hard to love someone into the Kingdom of God by force, on the threat of death. Repent or die! It is sad to say that the Church does not have a great record on demonstrating the love of God. Yes, we have done great things, established hospitals, orphanages, etc. But we have also sent armies in the name of God to force people into the Kingdom. It is time we begin to admit our “sins” before the world and seek forgiveness and healing. It is time we stop demanding that everyone be like us. It is time we begin to live out the faith as demonstrated by Jesus, the Living Word, in the Gospels.

Look at Jesus. He only invited people to the Kingdom of God. Never do we find him forcing anyone to believe. In fact, he often confronted people with the motive of why they were following him (Read all of John 6). People were always able to refuse his invitation. He made them aware of the consequences but never forced them to accept his offer. We often fail to honor his way, we want to twist arms to make them come, believe. We still want to force or bribe people into God’s kingdom. And, we degrade those who decide not to come.

We are called to live out the Word of God and let people make up their own minds. If we live out Christ then we are doing what we have been called to do. It is the love of God demonstrated through us that attracts people into God’s kingdom. However, we would rather give out McDonald meals and hope that we can bribe them into God’s presence. (This is what one church was doing a few years ago. Taking its bus and stopping where other church buses stopped and bribing the kids waiting with free McDonald meals!) We see the end justifying the means. This is not the image of the Word we find in the Gospels. Jesus simply demonstrated God to us through his actions and let us make the final decision.

It is not easy being an example. We are imperfect at best. We often hear sports figures or television/movie personalities say that they are not or do not want to be a role model for others. However, the moment they become a sports hero or star they became role models whether they wanted it or not. When they accepted the position on the team or became a person in the public eye they were elevated to example status. The same is true for us. When we became one with Christ we became an example of the Living Word of God in the world. We became an ambassador for Christ.

I remember a youth group leader from my teen years. He lectured us every week against the evils of smoking. He gave the impression that smoking would get us a direct ticket to hell. We would not pass “go”, not collect \$200 dollars but go directly to hell should we smoke. It was the sin that would doom us or so we thought from his lectures! Then we caught him smoking. All the credibility he had with us was gone. I am not sure if he ever recovered in our eyes. Now, if had told us he smoked, it was a habit hard to quit, etc. and that it would be best if we never started we would have listened. His actions spoke far louder than his words.

We do need to remind the world that we are not perfect. Nor should we ever claim to be. We have failed and we will fail. Not intentionally but we will fail. However, to be One in Christ is to move beyond our failures and to seek to grow in the love and knowledge of the “Living Word” in order to live our lives more fully as examples of his grace. It means we try to go the extra mile, to turn the other cheek, to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and love those the world seems not to love. Not because we are perfect but because we are being perfected through the Living Word that lives in us. We cannot use our failures as an excuse not to be what God has called us to be—ambassadors of the Living Word.