

*"Words"*

*Ephesians 4:25-5:2, Psalm 130*

*First Congregational UCC*

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Sticks and stones may break my bones ... but words will never hurt me!

This nursery rhyme was first published in 1862 in the *Christian Recorder*, but we suspect that the saying is much older. The idea is that we should ignore hurtful words ... don't get upset, don't get mad, and don't get even. But we all know this rhyme is a lie... Words hurt.

In this morning's text the author of the letter to the Ephesians seems to focus on words: on telling the truth and using words that build up the community, not destroy it. The author tells the church of Ephesus to stop lying! Speak the truth. Stop stealing! Get a job, work with your hands, so that you can give to the poor. Don't let any evil words come out of your mouth, but only speak words which give grace. Put away anger, brawling, and slander (so this afternoon's brawl has been cancelled), because instead, we will be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving. And in so doing, we will imitate God.

This makes me wonder what was happening at the First Congregational Church of Ephesus ... were they a particularly unruly bunch of people? Or were they just a group of people learning how to be Christians ... how to be a church? For whatever reason, the author seems to focus on words.

Let's think about words for a moment. What words impacted your life? What words affected you, especially when you were young? Can you remember the most hurtful words, or the best words? Maybe these words were spoken to you, or about you, or even by you ... Words like ...

You're worthless. You'll never amount to anything. You are so talented! You can do it! You're a disappointment. I love you. I hate you! You'll never change. Who do you think you are?

Did you remember any words? How did those words affect you?

Words have creative power ... it's no mistake that the Hebrews punctuated Genesis chapter 1 with "And God said." Paul wrote that God calls things into existence, "speaking that which is not as though it were."

We know that children who are told repeatedly that they will never amount to anything usually don't. Last week I heard two stories from three different adults who remembered words their teachers said. One cried when she remembered the words her son heard: "You are a waste of my breath."

Have you remembered the words? Do you remember good words, or hurtful words?

I bet you've remembered more negative words than positive ones. Studies have shown that our brains have a negativity bias. The brain is more sensitive to unpleasant input, which is why personal insults hurt so much and stay with us so much longer than positive words. That is why negative advertising is more effective than positive advertising.

When I read this text from Ephesians, I am immediately convicted about my words. Every week I say something I shouldn't.

When I volunteered in the county jail, I challenged the female inmates to look in the mirror and say one positive statement about themselves. I didn't realize that I was asking too much. It couldn't be done. The women would look at themselves, and they could not think of one good thing to say. It is easier for us to say something negative than positive.

The church in Ephesus needed a reminder, as we do, to use positive words. Remember that these early Christian churches were struggling to form their identity. Who, or what, are Christians? How do they look, act, and speak?

This is interesting, because 2000 years later, I think we're in almost the same place. We need to be very conscious of the message we send to our community.

In the coming weeks, I hope, we will hang some banners and flags featuring the ribbon heart you see on the screens, on the outside of our building. And we expect that this heart, with the simple words, "You are welcome here," will be positive words for many people in our community. But we also know that some people may struggle with the extravagant welcome that we're offering. So our positive words may meet with negative responses.

What do we do when this happens? We return again to this letter to the church of Ephesus. We read again that we are to speak truth; that we may get angry, but that's no excuse for wrong action. We don't use evil words, but instead, our words will give grace. We need to be conscious of our words, and be respectful of people's struggle with our definition of Christian.

This is where our church really connects with the church at Ephesus. The Ephesian church consisted of gentiles, mainly Greeks. The Jews treated them with contempt; they were unclean, uncircumcised ... untouchable. Today, I see our church identifying with the Ephesians, with our open invitation to all people, which draws criticism from our conservative neighbors.

When criticism comes, we have to be careful of the words we say to one another, even here in the safety of this community. Any time there is change, there is resistance. There is uncertainty. I wasn't a member of this congregation when you worked through the open & affirming process, but I worked through it with you. I know how deeply embedded our beliefs can be ... especially when we've heard a different message for so long. It's one thing to say we're open and affirming of all people, but it's a different thing to put our heart out on our sleeve – for the whole world to see.

I have promised you, that as we envision our future, our Sunday morning worship will not change. We'll have the same music, the same order of service, and the same pastor. But if I am going to speak honestly, I have to say that one thing may change. The faces in our pews may change. Our community will grow and it will change. And when our flags are hung, and different people begin to worship with us, we will have a choice to make. Will we speak words of encouragement to one another, or will we grumble?

Will our words build up the body of Christ, or cause division?

Will our words honor the text from Ephesians, and give grace?

When we need a reminder of who we are, we go back to Ephesus. The first two chapters of Ephesians tells us what Christians are. Listen to these words: you are saints, you are holy, you are chosen, blameless, forgiven, redeemed, blessed with spiritual blessing, adopted as sons and daughters, members of God's household, God's possession, God's workmanship, created to do good works, you are seated in the heavenly realm, you are holy temples, you are the place where God lives! That's what Christians are.

The Psalmist knows the power of words! "I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in God's word I hope." This is why I love the Bible so much! It is alive. It is more than ink on paper.

I know how the Bible was put together ... but I believe that the Holy Spirit influenced much of that decision-making process ... because the words of scripture affirm us and correct us, and they challenge us to be better people.

So today, I have a challenge for you, and it is the same challenge I gave the women in the Steuben County Jail. Say at least one positive word to yourself every day. Look in the mirror and say something like "God loves you! You are blessed! You are forgiven! You have potential!" or maybe, "I like your face."

The world gives us negative messages all day long: you're too old, you're too young; you're not rich enough, or tall enough, or good enough. But God tells us a different message. You are blessed!

Practice on yourself so that when the time comes, you can say those words to those around you ... new folks who are visiting ... or those who are closest to you.

And when we see new signs on our building, and new – different - faces appear around our table, we will have practiced our spiritual muscles, and we will speak words of extravagant welcome.

The world is watching, listening, remembering ... and they will be saying, "This is what Christians look like."

Let's pray: God of many words, teach us to speak like Christians. Amen.