

Loving With Your Words

James 3:1-5

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Good morning! How's everyone doing? We've got one 'great' the rest are silent, so I'll try to be lively and keep everyone awake, okay?

We've been in this series called '40 Days of Love,' looking at love from different aspects and taking ideas from that on how we might be able to apply that to our lives. Today is 'Loving with our words,' so we're going to be talking about loving with our words.

Why don't we start with the book of James and we'll go from there. James writes, "For we all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says is a perfect man able also to bridle his full body. If we put bits into the mouths of horses so that they obey us, we guide their whole bodies as well. Look at the ships also. Though they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs."

So, obviously James thinks words are pretty important because our words, as he says, like a rudder, direct or determine where we go in life, and what our relationships look like and how they play out. I think his point is well taken, I think it's also fairly obvious; we experience this on a day to day basis. I imagine everybody here has at least at some point, said something stupid that made a relationship a little dicey; a little bit harder to navigate. I hope also that we've experienced, at least at some point, how words can strengthen and encourage and bring life into a relationship or to someone who desperately needs it. Words kind of carry this dual power, but the point isn't that it can destroy or create first; it's that words are incredibly powerful.

Now to think about this or to think this through, I want to actually go back a couple of weeks. I talked about the image of God and how because we are created in God's image that means that we are created to be loved and to love and be loved by God. As well as the fact that because we bear God's image, we are created to love and be loved by other people. Image bearers you might say. So I want to go back to the beginning, to Genesis 1. As I read through this section here, you're going to hear some patterns, there's a rhythm taking place that doesn't necessarily come out if you're just reading it. So it's not in the bulletin, it's not going to be on the slides, I just want us to listen for just a couple of verses.

"And God said, let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters. And God made the expanse and separated the waters that were under the expanse from the waters that were above the expanse. And it was so. And God called the expanse heaven. And there was evening and there was morning the

second day. And God said, let the waters under the heavens be gathered together into one place, and let the dry land appear. And it was so. God called the dry land earth, and the waters that gathered together He called seas. And God saw that it was good. And God said let the earth sprout vegetation, plants yielding seed and fruit trees bearing fruit, in which is their seed according to its kind on the earth. And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation, plants yielding seed according to their own kinds and trees bearing fruit in which is their seed, according to its kind. And God saw that it was good. There was evening and there was morning the third day.”

Did you hear that pattern? There’s a rhythm embedded in it that makes it sound an awful lot like poetry, because in one sense it is. God says let something and it was so. And this is how that something looks, and God sees that it is good. God says let there be something and it was so. And then this is how that something looks and God sees that it is good. It’s this rhythm and this pattern in creation. We perhaps see a rhythm and pattern in creation as the sun rises and sets. I don’t think it’s a coincidence, but that’s just me.

The first thing that we draw from that is that God creates; God is creative. And so if God is a creator and He creates and He is creating and He is creative, does that also mean that if He were to create these weird things called humans that bear His image and are made in His likeness, that we also would be creative? I think so. Whether we like to draw or paint, or build and construct, or cook or play music, or plant and grow, these are all taking part in this capacity and this drive to create and be creative. That is a part of the core of our being; part of what it means to be human in fact.

Now the second part to it is that embedded in that pattern there, in that rhythm of creation, each section begins with ‘and God said.’ God creates the world with His word; His word contains immense power to create. So if we who bear God’s image have this capacity and drive to create and be creative, then maybe also it’s not surprising that our words have such incredible power to create as well. Because this is how God operates, we can see at least just a shadow or just a very faint reflection within what it means to be human. Words have an incredible power to create, I submit *because* we are made in God’s image. As we all know, hopefully fairly soon after we are created, we say, thanks God, catch you later. And things don’t go quite so well, but we gain the knowledge of good and evil, right? So now words are not only just to be creative, powerful things; they can also destroy. And unfortunately they can destroy in ways that say a gun could never possibly come close.

Now we talk also about Jesus as the word; or at least John was. Jesus is the word, the word of God, and God created the world with His word, which is really His Son. I don’t really grasp all of that necessarily, my guess is neither does anyone else. But we can see this play out in Jesus’ life of ministry; because wherever Jesus goes He creates life. Leprosy is recreated into healthy skin. Blind eyes can see. The poorest of the poor and the oppressed like everyone around them, have this renewed sense of life and value because Jesus comes and says God cares especially about you. Something I think they had never heard before. Jesus creates life, and He gives life to everything He touches. So it’s not that far to say that Jesus as the word, is also the word that God spoke to

create; because that's what Jesus does. Now sometimes the people that hear Jesus' words, and see His ministry in action, are not thrilled with what Jesus is doing. But that doesn't mean that Jesus is not creative, it just means that they're not real fond of Jesus' creativeness; we'll get to that in a little bit.

Now some of the most poignant words of Jesus, I think, happen at the end of His life when He is dying, nailed to the cross, suffocating, and He breathes His last breath. But before He does so He says, "It is finished." And what is finished is actually that chapter in human history. A new chapter begins three days later when Jesus is resurrected. And when that happens, the world as we know it has been changed; because Someone went from dead to alive. And alive in the sense that He won't actually die again, that had never happened before. And once that happened, the unalterable reality of death has been crushed. It's a new world. And we believe that we are connected, intimately and deeply with this resurrection; with this restoration and redemption through our baptism. That we're connected with Jesus; with His death and then His life. And He brings us forgiveness and He restores who we are as humans. He restores that part of us that bears God's image, and then He sends us out.

Jesus shared a whole lot of words with 12 guys chiefly, that we know in Acts look more like about 120; small number still and they changed the world forever. They created life in the pattern that they learned from Jesus creating life. So the question is, I mean this is really abstract stuff, the question then is, what does it look like for a church, a Christian? People following Jesus to take part in this, using our words to create or to love; I think they're really the same thing in this sense. What does it look like for us to use our words to love each other, love our community, love our world; and use the power of our words to create?

A couple of days before I left for college my dad gave me a ring, and he said remember who you are, and remember who you came from. As I thought and internalized that, it created very much a sense of vision of who I am and where I'm going and what I'm doing and why I'm here. My dad used his words to love me and by doing that he used the power of words to create something very substantial within me. That's not something that I'll forget very easily. I hope we all at some point, unfortunately it's rarer than it needs to be, but maybe we've heard or used the words of I love you just because; no reason, I just do. You're there and I love you. Powerful, powerful words, unconditional love. And what those do is they work into this mess that the outside world and the inside world and family even, creates within us. Where they say we're only lovable if we get certain grades, go to certain school, get certain salary, have a certain position, marry a certain person, live in a certain neighborhood, have a certain house, drive a certain car, and on and on and on. That okay, if you can complete these things then you'll really be lovable, or then I'll really have made it. And that's nonsense because the power of 'I love you just because' is it can take all of that baggage and store it in this big barn. And then it smiles and lights a match and sets that barn on fire. I love you just because, just because you are, no reason. Big words.

I mentioned in Jesus' life sometimes His words and His life and His ministry weren't always received all that enthusiastically by certain groups of people. And I submit that

He's still creating life and spreading life. It's just that His words are honest and people don't want to hear it. Because honest words feel destructive; it feels like someone's just insulting but the reality is that truly honest words, honest out of love, which is important, have this way of working into us and giving us a chance to maybe deconstruct. Not destroy, but deconstruct something that we built around us that may actually be killing us.

For those of you who don't know, I imagine most of you here do, a couple of years ago I was diagnosed with a chronic form of leukemia. And when that happens you of course, well a lot of things happen, but one of the things that you try to do is convince yourself that you're going to be fine and nothing's going to be changed. You're healthy, what are they talking about? And so there was this one day when I was in my oncologist's office talking with the head nurse. And I was complaining and whining, which I usually did, anyway I was complaining of having to take this one medication because it was expensive and was kind of a pain. I took it to mitigate the side effects of another drug, the oral chemo. Well, then maybe I can come off of it soon if I whatever because I really wanted to be okay. And then finally the nurse, Joan, says, "Eric, you have a chronic illness. You're going to have this for the rest of your life, you need to get used to that." Oh, that hurt so bad because it forced me to deal with and eventually de-construct that denial that I had built around myself. But they created life, it hurt oh yeah, but it created life because it gave me the chance to finally become aware of and present to reality. It allowed me, in the words of my mentor, be where I am. Oh it hurt, and honesty can do that. But it gives us the chance to come to terms with reality' and it's creative in that it creates something powerful and real after the pattern that Jesus created in others. Something powerful and real.

The power of words does not exist solely as me talking to you or you talking to me, or you talking to anyone. The power of words is also very powerfully and creatively used to love each other when we're listening. If someone is trying to talk, maybe the most lovingly and powerful thing we can do with our words is show them that we are listening, that we're tracking with them, and that we're connected.

When I was in college both undergrad and graduate school, I was a network technician off and on. And that meant a couple of things, one of them meant I got yelled at a lot because people get really, really crabby when their internet isn't working and they can't answer e-mail. So most of the time it was over the phone and they were very upset and needed to express that. There was this one phone call I'll never forget. This one component that he was trying to use wasn't working and he was frustrated, and so he calls us and it was out of our jurisdiction, so there was nothing we could really do about it. Then he got mad, really mad, and just expressed that anger and yelling and I was getting kind of tired of it, and I guess in one of those rare moments of clarity instead of just hanging up the phone, is what I wanted to do, I responded with 'this is frustrating, I understand. I'd be frustrated too because this thing isn't working and you really need it to. And you're angry; I can hear that, I would be angry too. Sorry to hear that.' And he stopped, just dead stopped. And his response was, 'yeah, yeah, sure is, it is frustrating.' Then I was finally able to say, 'look, maybe if you call this number they can help you.'

Using your words to creatively form that connection between you and someone else is powerful, especially when it's listening. It's just reflecting back, this is what I hear you saying, or this is the emotion that I hear. Those words are powerful and creative because they create that connection, they tell like I did to the guy on the phone; it tells that guy that he is not alone. That there's someone with him that cares.

So may you use your words, powerful, with care, but creatively. Use your words to create. Use your words like after the pattern of Jesus and after the pattern of Genesis 1, to create life, to create love. Use them to express connection. Use them to express that you love them and realize that by doing so you are tapping into the core of your being as a bearer of God's image; as a bearer of the restored God's image through Jesus and in our baptism. Use your words to connect, use your words to create, to love, to encourage, to build up, to call someone out; all out of creative love. Because our words create, and that's the charge of a Christian. Let us use our words to love. We are creative beings, that's the way we can do it. Amen.