

**“Words, Words, Words”**  
**John 4:44-26**  
**First Presbyterian Church**  
**March 19, 2017**

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

Living God, through the reading of the Scriptures and by the power of your Spirit, may we hear for ourselves the good news, and believe, because of your Word that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world. **Amen.**

**John 4:4-26**

<sup>4</sup>But he had to go through Samaria. <sup>5</sup>So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. <sup>6</sup>Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. <sup>7</sup>A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” <sup>8</sup>(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) <sup>9</sup>The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) <sup>10</sup>Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” <sup>11</sup>The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? <sup>12</sup>Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” <sup>13</sup>Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup>but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” <sup>15</sup>The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” <sup>16</sup>Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.” <sup>17</sup>The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; <sup>18</sup>for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!” <sup>19</sup>The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet. <sup>20</sup>Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.” <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. <sup>22</sup>You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. <sup>23</sup>But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. <sup>24</sup>God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” <sup>25</sup>The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” <sup>26</sup>Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

Sermon<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This sermon is adapted from one preached and published by Thomas G. Long, first as a baccalaureate sermon to the Class of 1991 at Princeton Theological Seminary (Princeton Seminary Journal, 1991) and then again in a collection of sermons for which I cannot locate the citation.

My friends, we don't have to search very far in our culture to realize that we live in an age that doesn't trust words very much. Though we speak them... read them... write them... text them... and email them. Though we are the "Information Age" and process words by the billions each day... we don't trust them very much. We know words can be slippery... that they can distort and deceive... that they are, as we say, cheap!

When a politician gives a campaign speech, what do we think to ourselves? (No offense intended to our congregation's elected leaders.) When the cable TV guy says you can count on him to come out and fix the problem on Thursday at 2:00... we don't! Even when a Christian friend says he or she will keep us in prayer, we raise a skeptical eyebrow. We don't trust words... they are sneaky... they're open to interpretation... here today and gone tomorrow.

This is nothing new, of course... the distrust of words goes back to the very beginning. Remember the story of Adam and Eve... and how things start to go south precisely at the point when the serpent suggests that God's words might not be all they seem to be. "Did God say... "Did God say you will die? No, you will not die... those were just "words." From the very dawn of creation, words were ours as a good gift of God. Yet, whatever else you and I lost that day in the Garden, we lost the trustworthiness of words.

Now, as you can imagine, this is not at all good news for folks in my line of work. And the fact is this is not good news for the rest of us as well... since so much of what we are called to do as Christians rests on what? Words. Financiers have capital... doctors have medicines... carpenters have hammers and saws... farmers have seed and soil. And Christians? Well, Christians have words – where there is despair, words of hope... where there is injustice, words of protest... where there is complacency, words of challenge... where there is grief, words of comfort. Words of praise... words of prayer... Bible words... sermon words... words are what we have.

Which is why it's so important for us to hear the claim of the gospel this morning –

- the claim that in Jesus Christ we get our words back...
- that in Jesus Christ words can be filled with grace and truth...
- that in Jesus Christ we can once again trust words...  
and that maybe we can even be trusted with words.

This is, in part, what this story of Jesus and the woman at the well is about – that words can really matter...

Think about it... what did Jesus really DO for this woman? What did he really DO for her? He didn't heal her of any disease. He didn't exorcise a demon or raise her child from the dead. What did Jesus really DO for this woman? He talked to her. That's all... he used words to talk to her. Yet, the words he spoke were so radically different from all the other words she had heard that she was never the same again.

This is even more amazing when you realize that this story does not begin with words,

but in silence. And not a nice... warm... “kum-ba-yah around the campfire” silence... it’s a cold... hard... “I can-hardly-believe-I’m-sitting-at-the-same-well-with-you” silence. Silence because SHE WHO CAME to the well was a Samaritan... and HE WHO RESTED at the well was a Jew. Because she who came to the well was a woman... and he who rested at the well was a man. And between this Samaritan woman and this Jewish man there was a towering and impenetrable wall of silence that had been built, brick by brick, over many centuries... mortared together with hatred and prejudice... and through which no word was allowed to pass. Until that day when this Jewish man said to this Samaritan woman: “Would you give me a drink of water?” And with those 8 words... with just a mundane question... the wall between them began to come down.

Now, because we are so awash in words... and words seem so cheap these days... it may be good to remember that some of the most significant moments of the work of God’s grace take place through words. Like the December day in 1955 when a bus driver in Montgomery, Alabama, ordered four people to get up and move to the back of the bus. As we now know one of those people was a department store clerk named Rosa Parks. She spoke so softly it was hard to hear her voice over the noise of the bus... but what she said was, “No.” No. And a wall began to come down.

United Methodist bishop, Will Willimon, tells about a young woman in a church he once served... her name was Anne. Much to her parents’ pride, after college Anne went to pharmacy school... (she was going to be a pharmacist) and being a good daughter, from time to time she would come home and go to worship with her parents. It was one Sunday evening... after one of her visits home... that Willimon got a call from Anne’s father. “Do you know what’s happened?” he asked... obviously upset. “Anne just called us to tell us she’s dropping out of pharmacy school.” “Really? What on earth could possibly lead her to do something like that?” “Well, we’re not sure,” the father confessed... “she really didn’t tell us, “but you know how much Anne likes you. We thought maybe you could call her up and talk some sense into her.” And Willimon did... he called her the next day. He reminded her of all her hard work and all the things she had achieved. He encouraged her to think long and hard before throwing it all away. And then, almost as an afterthought, he asked: “How in the world did you come to such a decision?” “Well, Pastor, it was your sermon yesterday... it started me thinking,” she said. She went on to recount the sermon’s theme – that God calls everyone to ministry... that God has some service for every Christian to do. “Pastor, it was then that I realized I was in pharmacy school for all the wrong reasons... I was there to make money rather than serve God. And then I remembered that wonderful summer I spent teaching migrant children to read. So during your sermon I heard God calling me to spend my life helping those kids.” There was a long silence on the preacher’s end of the line. “Now look, Anne. You know, I was just preaching, don’t you? You know that was just a sermon!” Yet, words... and EVEN an occasional sermon word... can cause the wall to come tumbling down.<sup>2</sup>

Well, when that wall between Jesus and the woman starts to come down, she seems startled... and maybe a little afraid. There’s something comforting about a wall. What

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<sup>2</sup> William H. Willimon in *What’s Right with the Church*, Harper and Row, 1985, p.112-113.

was it that Robert Frost wrote? “Good fences make good neighbors.”<sup>3</sup> Because even though walls restrict us... they limit our view... but at least when they’re up we don’t have to face whatever may be on the other side. So, maybe in an attempt to get that wall back up, the woman raises a whole flurry of questions about the differences and disagreements between her people and his people.

*"How come you, a Jew, are asking me, a Samaritan woman,  
for a drink?" she asked.*

*"If you knew the generosity of God" he replied,  
"you would be asking me for a drink,  
and I would give you fresh, living water."*

*"Who do you think you are? she says.  
You don't even have a bucket and this well is deep.  
Even Jacob had a bucket.*

*Are you a better man than our ancestor Jacob  
who gave us this well?"*

*Jesus said, "Everyone who drinks this water  
will get thirsty again and again,  
but those who drink of the water I give  
will never thirst—not ever."*

It was then that the woman uttered the fateful words - that once spoken – forever changed her life:

*"Give me this water that I may never be thirsty," she said.*

*"All right," Jesus replied, "Go call your husband."*

*"I have no husband."*

*"That's right. You have no husband.*

*You've had five husbands.*

*You told the truth when you said you have no husband."*

Now, this is point in the story where the morality police start to lick their chops... casting the woman as a serial divorcee who trades in husbands like they were used cars. The problem is that back in Jesus’ day a woman couldn’t do that even if she wanted to. And if there was any trading in going on it was the husbands who did it... with nothing more than a signed letter of dismissal. So this woman is not who we may think she is; a “flooie” who devours husband after husband with her unfaithfulness. Instead, it is SHE who has been devoured by a system that has passed her from man to man until she no longer has even the dignity of marriage. That is who she is until Jesus touches the DEEPEST PLACE in her life... until, using words, Jesus names her deepest wound.

Tom Long tells about one of his seminary students who became pastor of a small Presbyterian church. The church was small enough that after she arrived she set for herself the goal of visiting every family on the roll in the first six months. At the end of six months, she had almost done it... there was just one family left. People said: “They haven’t been here in two years.

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<sup>3</sup> Robert Frost in his poem entitled “Mending Wall.”

“Don’t bother with them, they aren’t coming back.” But she had set her goal... so one afternoon she drove out to their house. Only the wife was home... she poured cups of coffee and they sat around the kitchen table and chatted. They talked about this... they talked about that... and then they talked about it. Two-and-a-half years ago, she had been at home with her young son. She was vacuuming in the back bedroom and had not seen him in a while so she switched off the vacuum, went into the den, and did not find him. She followed his trail – across the den... through the patio door... across the patio to the swimming pool where she found him. “At the funeral, our friends at the church were very kind,” she said. They told us it was God’s will.” The pastor put her cup down on the table. “Your friends meant well, I’m sure... but they were wrong.” “What do you mean?” she asked. “I mean that God does not will the death of children. God did not will the death of your son.” “Then who do you blame? I guess you blame me!” “No, I don’t blame you... and I don’t blame God either.” “Then how do you explain it?” she asked, her anger rising. “I don’t know. I can’t explain it. I don’t understand why such things happen either. I only know that God’s heart broke when yours did.” The mother’s face reddened... her jaw tightened... she crossed her arms on her chest... and it was clear that this conversation was over. The minister left the house kicking herself for re-opening such a deep wound: “Why didn’t I just leave that alone? she murmured. “Why did I have to go there?” But then a few days later the phone rang... and it was she. “We don’t know where this is going,” she said, “but would you come out and talk with my husband and me? We have assumed that God is angry at us; maybe it’s the other way around.”

Words are powerful... and it was with a word that Jesus named the issue in the Samaritan woman’s life. Perhaps that’s why she kept trying to rebuild the wall:

*“I see that you are a prophet,” she said.*

*“Now let’s see, you prophets like to talk theology, don’t you?”*

*Isn’t it interesting that you Jews worship in Jerusalem  
and we Samaritans worship on the mountain.*

*Would you like to comment on that?*

*“Woman, I tell you, the hour is coming and now is  
when the mountain or the temple won’t make any difference.*

*What will make a difference is you –  
that you worship God in spirit and in truth.”*

*“And then maybe after we talk about the mountain and the temple,  
we can move on to eschatology.*

*You know, to what’s going to happen when the messiah comes.”*

And with that Jesus offers the best and most revealing word of all. “You speak of Messiah... I am he.” I AM the One who breaks down the walls. I AM the One who touches the deepest wounds of your life. I AM the Word who is sitting here at this well with you, full of grace and truth.”

Well, lest you think that these powerful words can only be spoken by Jesus... or, God forbid, only by preachers... let me tell you about Faye Hill Thompson. She was a former high school teacher living in Ellsworth, Iowa... not too far from where I was in Ames. In a devotional piece that I have saved all these years she writes about an experience we have all had in the check-out line of the grocery. "After placing my food items on the automated grocery counter, I asked the cashier a genuine, "How are you today?" Unlike other cashiers who grunt "fine" or "Okay," this one clearly wanted to talk. She volunteered how some customers had been surly... how she really just wanted to go home to her preschool-age son who was staying with a sitter... and how it was a real struggle to be a single mom. Well, my daughter, who was standing there with me, became really fidgety and asked if she could go to the car. She finally whined so much that I relented.

Back in the car... as I finished buckling my seat belt... my daughter let it all out about how embarrassed she was when I talked to cashiers when other people waited in line behind us. "Have you ever noticed all the people staring at us?" she asked. "Have you even seen them?" Though I thought she exaggerated her point, she deserved an explanation. "Did you ever consider these people might be having a bad day?" I asked. "Offering them a friendly greeting... a smile... or just a kind word... is my way of encouraging them... my way of building them up."

Unpacking the groceries at home I kept thinking about my daughter's words. Maybe she was right... maybe I did embarrass her... and maybe I did talk too long to cashiers while others waited. So over the next few months I scaled back my friendly conversations at check-out counters. The only exceptions were very short conversations with the cashier I mentioned before.

Well, several months passed... and an early Christmas card with an unfamiliar return address appeared in my mail. I opened it and read: "When you come into the grocery store and visit with me, it brightens my day... although it sometimes embarrasses your daughter! Thanks! Love, Jill (the check-out girl)."<sup>4</sup>

And the Word became flesh and dwells among us... AMONG us... among US. So my friends, the promise is this: that when we head out into the world each day... where folks have been beaten down by people or systems or just life... where folks are confused and hurting and afraid to admit it... when we head out into that world and try to find something – anything – gracious to say... the promise is that through the power of God's Spirit our frail words can begin to dismantle the walls that are between us... that our frail words can actually change a person's life... that our frail words can become earthen vessels for THE Word so desperately needed. The Word which is Christ. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Deacon Linda Van Horn shared this story in her devotional at a deacon's meeting. It comes from Faye Hill Thompson's book of devotionals for women titled *Thread of Hope* (CPH-St. Louis, 2001), p. 104-105.