

September 11, 2005
Isaiah 55:6-11, Matthew 5:38-48
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“Building Faithful Lives”

Words have the power to create a world. A great storyteller has the ability to use a few carefully chosen words to evoke a scene, create a mood, develop characters and invite the listener into a new and imaginative world. Some people use words to build up and encourage others. We hear people say, “You have such a talent; you are an amazing athlete; you are a good listener; you have a heart for others.” When we hear such words spoken about us, we begin to see ourselves as competent, talented and capable of accomplishing anything. Others use words to ridicule, control and destroy. They say, “You will never amount to anything; you are weak; you are a failure.” If we hear such hard words often enough, we begin to believe what others say and find our world collapsing into a black hole. Adolf Hitler and Winston Churchill shared a gift. They were both masters at using words to create a vision of the world. Hitler used words to create a hell on earth and Churchill used words to empower people to find a way out.

The power of words to create a world should be no surprise to us as Christians. We say that God spoke at the beginning of time and created the universe out of nothing. God continues to speak. God spoke through Moses and gave the people the ten words on the basis of which they could build a community of peace and justice. The people of Israel were so convinced about the power of words to create reality that they were very cautious about the words the prophets of Israel spoke in the name of God. There were times that the people tried to silence the prophets when the prophets spoke words of judgment. The people believed that whatever the prophet said as the word of God would come true. When the prophet Jeremiah spoke God’s word of judgment against Jerusalem, the people threw him in a pit to shut him up. People who don’t want to leave the old world of familiar misery in which they live have always stoned the prophets. In our Old Testament lesson, we hear God speaking through the prophet Isaiah about the power of words to create a new reality. “So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” (Is. 55:11)

As modern people we have heard so many words that we tend to treat words as if they have no power. We say that talk is cheap. We say we have heard it all. We have listened to too many broken promises. Whenever we fall into the modern trap of thinking that words don’t mean anything or that words don’t have any power, we need to remember that Jesus Christ is the Word of God made flesh.

When Jesus speaks, his words have the power to create a new world that gives us an alternate view of reality. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus draws us into a world of righteousness and grace. The world created by his words stands in contrast to the daily struggle to survive, to hold our own and to make ends meet in a dog-eat-dog world. In a world in which the poor have nothing, the grieving find no consolation, the meek get

stepped on, the righteous get ridiculed, the merciful get kicked in the teeth, the pure in heart are taken advantage of, and the peacemakers get killed, Jesus dares to say that all of these are blessed now. The world created by Jesus' words stands in contrast to the world of Roman occupation and oppression. The world Jesus creates even stands in contrast to the world of the Pharisees who lived by the letter of the law. The words of Jesus give us a new freedom and call us to a higher righteousness and to a more noble way of life.

If we are to build faithful lives of obedience to Jesus Christ, then we need to listen to his words and enter the strange new world of the gospel. In this new world, faithfulness means no longer operating by the law of just retribution or "an eye for an eye." It means living by forgiveness, free submission, generosity and kindness. At the time of Jesus, Rome occupied the land of Israel. The language Jesus uses suggests that he is talking about how believers are to respond when Roman soldiers treat them unfairly or demand their labor. The followers of Jesus will demonstrate that they live in the new world of God's grace by not resisting, enduring the insult, giving sacrificially and going the extra mile. Anyone can love their neighbors and be kind to those who are like them. It doesn't take any special grace to pray for your family and for your circle of friends. It takes a whole new perspective to pray for your enemies and to overcome hatred with love. By doing these things, perhaps they will awaken the enemy to the love of God and the new world of the gospel.

This fall at Second Church, we are focusing on the theme: Building Faithful Lives. If we are to build faithful lives of obedience to Jesus Christ, then we can't go on living by the world's rules. The desire for revenge and the desire to get even exact a terrible spiritual cost. Hatred demands a spiritual price that we can't afford to pay. Jesus shows us another way. The Sermon on the Mount is not a collection of random teachings of Jesus; it is an invitation to enter a world created by his word. Only by entering this world can we build faithful lives.

If we are to lead faithful lives, then we cannot claim to be a Christian and live like everybody else. We cannot go on talking contemptuously about others, nursing old wounds, wasting our time and money, taking our spouses for granted, betraying our friends, ignoring the hungry and living in fear. Building faithful lives means listening to Jesus and entering the world of the gospel.

One hundred and forty years ago, another leader named Abraham Lincoln invited our nation to enter a new world created by his words. The words are found in his Second Inaugural Address. The war was ending. The wounds of the nation were deep. Hatred and the desire for revenge ran high. On March 4, 1865, Lincoln gave the people an alternate vision:

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.

Today is the fourth anniversary of the events of 9/11. If we have learned anything over these past four years it is that hatred and the desire for revenge only lead to an unending

cycle of violence and death. Following Jesus, Lincoln understood that the only way to build a new future is through forgiveness and love.

We are still in shock from the natural disaster and human tragedy that have hit the Gulf States and stunned our nation. Certainly, there are many questions to be answered about the storm, about how we failed to provide immediate aid and about the responsibility for this human failure. We cannot stop with questions or end with bitterness. “With malice toward none [and] with charity toward all” we need to “bind up the nation’s wounds.”

On this day in this hour of worship, we commit ourselves to building faithful lives. We build faithful lives through worship, mission, youth and children’s ministries, service, Bible study, fellowship and Christian education. The words we hear and the words we speak have the power to create the world we choose to inhabit. Those who dare to live by the words of Jesus in their personal lives, in their relationships with others and in this complex world are the ones who will awaken the whole world to this new world of the gospel.