

“Use Your Words”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
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[James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38](#)

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Perhaps you’ve heard or said this sometime in your younger years. And you’ve probably also learned since then how this statement is absolutely wrong. My own life experience, filled with many years of breaking various bones, has led me to believe that the opposite is in fact true, that while sticks and stones and bike crashes and falls can break bones that hurt for a time, some words that are thrown at us can cause much worse damage and longer-lasting pain.

Indeed, our words have great power to cause harm to others and ourselves. They are powerful tools that we can use and, unfortunately, often do use to effectively tear people down. Our words can be used to belittle people by making fun of them, criticizing their appearance, mocking their abilities, or slandering their identity. Our words are harmful when they are used to gossip, spread rumors, or make up stories about others. Our words are destructive when they are used to utter lies, to deceive, or to spread misinformation. Our words harm when they are used to make vows that we have no intention of keeping or to artfully conceal broken promises. The list could go on and on, for over the course of history, since humans first used words, we have learned and practiced many ways to use them harmfully.

But also, throughout human history, people have recognized that offering words that harm is not good for the one who receives them or the one who offers them or for the whole of society, and so people all over the world have lifted up the value of using words to heal, build, and help. Aware of their potential to cause harm, we teach our children to use their words in ways that are good and not bad by instructing them to speak truthfully, to speak respectfully, and to speak kindly. And as we get older, we still need these instructions (perhaps more than when we were kids), and so we hear and hopefully heed wise teachings, like those given to people of the Christian tradition by the author of the Epistle of James, which were read in today’s first scripture lesson, as he exhorts us to use our words to bless

and not to curse, to learn to be like springs, out of which flows only pure, fresh, life-giving water by offering only life-giving, people-building words.

We know that living wisely in this way is not easy, though, which is why we need constant reminders from our scriptures, sermons, and songs to use our words well. This is why we get together on Sunday mornings and attend mid-week studies and have private devotional time, because these all help us to take on the challenge of growing in how we use our words to build.

But taking on this challenge, like many other challenges, is exactly what we are called to do, from the cradle to the grave, as disciples of Christ. As we heard in our gospel lesson from Mark, we are all called to deny ourselves and take up our crosses and follow Christ in service to others.

Now, decades ago, I had a co-worker who was very serious about following Christ in serving others and dedicated his life to working as a chaplain to incarcerated teenagers. He took our shared calling to carry a cross not only seriously, but quite literally, and so, everywhere he went, he carried a four-foot tall cross. He carried this with him when he went to visit teens at youth detention facilities, and he carried it around in our office, and he carried it when he went shopping, and he carried it when he went to restaurants, and he carried it when going to football games and concerts and at all other times. While that is certainly one approach to carrying one's cross, I hope we don't all need to literally carry a wooden cross in every moment to be reminded of Christ's sacrifice and our identity as cross-carrying followers of Christ.

I hope that, whether or not we have physical reminders of the cross around us or on us, we can always keep in mind the cross Jesus himself carried and was then placed on and remember his sacrificing of his own will to do God's will, the giving of his own life because he was steadfast in teaching how people to live more faithfully and to have more grace-filled lives, and his dedication to teaching and healing in spite of the growing threat of harm being done to him by religious and political leaders who considered him and his activities to threaten their own power over others. The cross reminds us that Jesus gave his all for the good of others, and carrying our own crosses means that we follow him in humbly submitting ourselves to God's will for us and freely giving every part of ourselves for the good of others.

And so we are called to carry our crosses by using our words always for the good of others and the glory of God, never to glorify ourselves at the expense of others. May you use your words to convey God's grace. May God's love and life be offered through you in your speech, singing, praying, writing, texting, emoji-sharing, gesturing while in traffic, and in all of your other communications. And, together, may we, as a family of faith, grow in how we communicate love and communicate lovingly, not only with the world outside, but with one another. Let us be humble and selfless here in using our words to bless one another and to build up one another and each other's ministries.

As we grow in how we use our words to convey God's love, may more of God's love and God's life be evident in the life we share and flourish in each of our hearts. Amen.