

## “The Power of Words”

John 4:5-26

March 15, 2020

You don't have to search very far in our culture today to realize that we live in an age in which people do not trust words very much. For example, when a politician gives a speech making all kinds of promises, our first reaction is often skepticism – “Right, like that's ever going to happen; promises, promises.” When we see something advertised on television and the announcer says, “It's free for a whole year,” we often think, “Oh, sure, what's the catch?” When a professional athlete or a high profile person in the media is accused of doing something wrong and says, “I didn't cheat” or “None of these accusations are true;” we usually shake our heads in doubt and we tend to assume guilt rather than innocence.

Rhetoric, talk, words – we don't trust them. In fact, we usually don't want words today, we want substance. Husbands and wives demonstrate this when they say, “If you really love me, don't just tell me – show me.” Or if a doctor appeared on the news and said, “I have found a cure for the corona virus;” would we take the doctor at his/her word? I'm sure we would want some proof before we would believe it.

But this distrust of words is nothing new. It has been there almost since the beginning of our world. When the serpent deceived Adam and Eve, he said to them, “Did God really say ‘you will die?’ That's not true, those were just words, you surely will not die.” And yet the main thing that God calls us to do in our lives – make disciples, to be His witnesses – is basically done with words. Doctors have medicine, farmers have seeds and soil, soldiers have weapons, but Christians have words, lots of words – prayer words, worship words, words of hope, words of comfort, words of encouragement, and words of praise.

While we live in a world where words are often not enough or where we are sometimes lost for words, our Gospel lesson for today gives us a great example of the power of words, in particular the power of simple words. We see Jesus today in a rather unusual setting. He is traveling with His disciples from Judea to Galilee and He stops along the way in Samaria. Now that may not seem like a big deal to us, but during those days there was tremendous animosity between Jews and Samaritans. In fact, Samaritans often ganged up and robbed Jewish people as they passed through their area – which is why Jesus' story that He told later on about the Good Samaritan was so striking to those who heard it. Therefore, when the Jews would travel to Galilee, they would often go around Samaria, which usually added 8-9 hours on to their trip, but it was safer. So seeing Jesus, as a Jew, here at a well in Samaria would be the equivalent of one of us stopping in the middle of a gang infested neighborhood. I'm sure the disciples tried to talk Jesus out of going through Samaria, but clearly God had a plan.

In this text Jesus is thirsty from His travels. It's the middle of the day, so as He rests next to a well, a Samaritan woman comes to draw some water and Jesus decides to engage her in conversation with some simple words by asking her for something to drink. It was risky enough that Jesus was in that area, but now He is talking to a Samaritan woman in public, which was strictly taboo. That just wasn't done. She is clearly surprised and says in a somewhat defensive way in verse 9, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” Jesus then talks about “living water” and eternal life, and while the woman is somewhat confused, she doesn't leave. Maybe she senses in Jesus a compassion or a kindness that she hadn't felt from anyone in quite a while, but she keeps the conversation going, in public, in which she says that she wants some of this “living water” so that she will no longer be thirsty or have to come to the well to draw water.

Jesus then told her to go get her husband; and with these words, Jesus effectively shows her her sin and gives her an opportunity to confess. She admits that she doesn't have a husband, and when Jesus tells her all about her background – He knows that she has been married 5 times and is currently living with a man who is not her husband – she is clearly amazed. A conversation that started off rather simply, gets complicated and personal very quickly. She knows she can't lie to Jesus, so just like many of us when we get into a conversation that makes us feel uncomfortable, she tries to change the subject of the conversation to something that would interest Jesus. Perceiving that Jesus is a prophet, she changes the topic to worship and asks in verse 20, “Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship. So who's right?”

Now, as I suggested, it's possible that she does this to get the spotlight off of her sinful lifestyle, but on the other hand since her sinful lifestyle is now out in the open, she may be concerned about her spiritual well being

and wants to find a place to go where she can confess her sins to God. Jesus' response is that you can worship God anywhere, the place or the city doesn't matter. The woman is somewhat surprised by Jesus' answer, so she expresses her faith in God by saying in verse 25, "I know the Messiah is coming and when he comes, he will tell us all things." Jesus responds to her in the last verse of our text by saying, "I who speak to you am he." For the first time Jesus reveals His true identity. What's interesting is that He doesn't make this announcement at the temple in front of the Jewish religious leaders or in a sermon to thousands of people, instead He chooses this outcast Samaritan woman.

The Bible goes on to say that this woman is so excited, having seen the Messiah and having been given forgiveness, hope, and a renewed sense of self-worth, that she abruptly leaves her water jar and runs back to tell the people in her village – people who had mocked her and rejected her – what she experienced. Can you imagine being so excited about Jesus that you literally drop what you are doing so that you can go out and tell others about Him? An encounter with Jesus changed her whole life, and in her enthusiasm to tell her story, she lost the shame of her sin. She came to the well as one disgraced (married 5 times), but she returns as one graced by the presence of God. Near the end of this chapter it says that many of the Samaritans from that town believed in Jesus, because of this woman's testimony.

If you have ever wondered whether or not you could be an effective Christian witness, this text is your answer. We all have a story to tell about our faith. When I was a teenager, I attended several different "youth rallies" or "gatherings" with our church youth group. Many of the students at the rally would stand up and give their testimony of how Jesus saved them from a life of drugs or alcohol or crime. And I remember sitting there somewhat overwhelmed thinking, "Wow! I don't have any kind of testimony to tell. I grew up in a home with two parents where we went to church every Sunday and I have always believed in Jesus." Kind of boring, I thought. But I learned as an adult, that was a story to tell, because many people did not have that upbringing and they wanted to know more about it and more about my faith.

The point is, we who know Jesus need to tell those who don't know Him, especially in this time of fear about the corona virus, because Jesus makes it clear today that our simple words, spoken in faith are all that we need to share with others. Jesus commands us to "make disciples, to be His witnesses" and I would bet that if we all knew that this corona virus was going to get worse to the point that it was threatening our lives, we would all probably be more proactive in telling others about Jesus and forgiving one another, as Jesus forgave that woman at the well and as He has forgiven us. In fact, with one of His last breaths on the cross Jesus prayed not for Himself, but for those who hurt Him saying, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

Jesus saw the worth of that woman at the well when everyone else did not. And He sees our worth and reaches out to save each one of us, through His death and resurrection. If you truly want to live the life God has called you to live, then Share God's Word with others, tell your faith story, forgive as God has forgiven you, and care for your neighbors at this time of uncertainty; because when we do that, then we are truly Living His Love.