

First Presbyterian Church
December 30, 2012
Rev. Pen Peery

The End of Words¹
John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.

What came into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.
The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.

No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

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¹ The title of this sermon derives from a book I read by the Rev. Dr. Richard Lischer who writes about reconciliation. The book's title is also *The End of Words*.

I counted it up and I discovered that I have preached more than 230 sermons in my relatively short tenure as a pastor. If you figure that each sermon is around 1,500 words that means I have spoken approximately 350,000 words from the pulpit.

My guess is that every preacher worries if the words they spend so much time carefully crafting amount to anything. Sometimes, as if you didn't know, we preachers take those words a little too seriously – believing that our sermons are the help that God needs to bring in the kingdom.

Yet, truthfully, what I have discovered ten years into parish ministry is that what I remember are not the words spoken from this place. They are not words at all – but moments that have been shared.

What I have found to be significant are late-afternoon visits on a front porch swing with the sun hanging low.

Or gathering in the living room with extended family to share stories and celebrate the life of a loved one recently departed.

Or holding a squiggly baby by the baptismal font while I look into her parent's faces as they make commitments on her behalf.

I don't remember what I said two years ago about the historical context in which Jesus' parables were written as found in the gospel of Matthew...

I remember sharing an early morning cup of coffee or an early evening pint and getting past the veneer of polite chit-chat to really hear what had been going on in lives of those who call me their pastor.

I remember staying up late after worshipping with 1,200 teenagers at Montreat to learn from and with the night-owls in the youth group.

I remember breaking the bread, and offering the cup...the smell of communion...and the privilege that it is to serve God's people.

I remember spreading ash on foreheads – young and old alike – so that we can be reminded of the fragile gift that is our life.

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It's not the words.
Words are important – sure.

The sermons that have been preached and that will be preached from this pulpit are a critical piece of the ministry of the gospel that goes on in this place.

But in the final analysis – words are not enough.

And so it was that – when the time was right – our God moved beyond words to show us the depth of his love.

John says:

And the Word became flesh and [dwelled] among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.

Do you want to know what love looks like?

Do you want to know about the love that God has for each of us?

Consider the fact that the decision to put on flesh and enter the world that God had created was just that – a decision.

God didn't have to enter our world.

It was a choice.

The Word became flesh and dwelled among us.

Among the places and among the people that were a far cry from the vision that God intended and among the places and the people who were in desperate need of grace.

The Word became flesh and dwelled among us.

Into a world where there is embarrassing inequality.

And random and senseless violence.

And car accidents.

And cancer.

The Word became flesh and dwelled among us.

Into a world that is complicated.

And beautiful.

And broken.

And bruised.

And full of potential.

Through the person of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, God chose to enter the fabric of this world in order to redeem it and change it and honor it and bless it.

And that Word – that Eternal Word – who was conceived of the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; [the Word who] descended into hell; [who] on the third day rose again from the dead and ascended into heaven – that Word-made-flesh is now represented by the flesh and blood that make up Christ's body in the church.

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There is a temptation in the Church, I think, to misunderstand the purpose of words.

Too often, I have found, church folks view the purpose of words to be the building blocks we use to construct the walls that set our Christian faith or our brand of Christian faith over and against something else.

In more church meetings than I care to recall (especially among other pastors) I have spent time fighting over words that define, or restrict, or distinguish what Christ's body will be or will not be.

When those war of words become entrenched, sometimes it is hard to distinguish the polarized version of what we call "church" from the kind of ridiculous, polarizing antics that are currently gripping our elected officials in Washington D.C.

A professor of mine in seminary helped me reconceptualize the purpose of the words that we use in church. When he was getting his doctorate, my professor studied with a man named Karl Barth – a Swiss theologian who has been instrumental in shaping what people in our branch of the Christian faith believe.

In Barth's study hung a painting by a Renaissance artist named Matthias Grunwold. The painting was Grunwold's representation of the passage we heard this morning from John's gospel. It was of the crucifixion with Jesus in the center, flanked by Mary being held by the Beloved Disciple on the left and John the Baptist on the right.

John stands next to Jesus with an open Bible in his hand, pointing to the crucified body of Jesus.

As the gospel says: [John the Baptist] was not the light, but he came to testify to the Light.

Barth's interpretation of that picture is that the words that we use – whether they be the way we interpret the unique and authoritative words of the Bible or the words that the church or church people use to talk about our faith – the words we use are for the purpose of pointing toward the One who loved us so much that he stepped into the messiness of this world and gave up his life when words were not enough.

That our words are rightly used – not for pointing at one another to prove our righteousness, but instead to point toward the One who put on flesh and walked among us.

When they are used this way, I have noticed that our words are
more full of humility than they are of pride;
more focused on searching for truth than defending it;
interested more in being shaped by God rather than using our language to shape the God we would rather have.

I have also noticed that when we view the purpose of our words to bear witness to Jesus Christ those words tend to move us to action – to live out what we believe.

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In the church, we call that kind of thing incarnation.
That is, embodying the words that are spoken.

We often limit our talk about incarnation to this time of year – during Christmas, when we celebrate the birth and beginning of this incredible gift of our God who was born in a manger – but in a day and age when people are hungry for an experience of God, skeptical of that which is not authentic and real, and weary of religious people who spend their time fighting amongst themselves, I think it is critical that the ministry of the church of Jesus Christ view everything we do as incarnational;

That it should be obvious to everyone that our faith is not only an academic exercise, but is also grounded and practiced in real life.

I have been your pastor for a grand total of five months.
Even in that amount of time, I have seen evidence of the fact that you – who make up Christ's body in this place – are well practiced in living out your faith beyond the page and in the world.

I know of your commitment to building relationships with partner families in Westerly Hills.

I watch as you show up on Friday mornings and Tuesday mornings to faithfully wrestle with scripture in a community of far-from-like-minded believers.

I shared a circle with Stephen Ministers, members of this church who dedicate three years of their lives to care for individuals who need a prayer partner or someone to walk with them during a difficult period.

I have had many, many conversations about your dreams of what God might be calling us – not to say – but to do as a downtown church in the heart of this great city.

I happen to think that all of that is holy.

I think all of those ways we use our words and our lives bears witness to the Light.

And I think that it is that kind of witness which will attract, welcome, and involve more and more people to experience – and become a part of – the Good News.

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