

## “THE WORD”

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Donald A. Gall, Guest Preacher  
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### Text

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth." - John 1:1,14

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A strange thing happened to me on the way to work one morning. I pulled up behind a car at a stop light that had one of those bumper stickers that read: "Honk if you love Jesus." So I did. And the driver flipped me off! Apparently she had forgotten about the words that were plastered on the rear-end of her car. But that's the scary thing about words: they have a way of following us around even when we've forgotten all about them!

It's one of the reasons I adopted a New Year's Resolution this year in which *I resolve to say what I mean and do what I say*. Now, the truth of the matter is I've made that same resolution for more years than I wish to recall because I have yet to fully live up to it. I have learned that just saying something doesn't make it happen. That's because words alone rarely accomplish anything, despite the fact that words command more of our time and attention than just about anything else.

It has been estimated that the average person uses approximately 20,640,000 words during her or his lifetime, which are enough to fill 340,000 books of 200 pages each. Now I have no idea who figured that out, but it was probably someone on a federal grant. Anyhow, when you stop to think about there being over 7 billion of us on this planet, that adds up to a whole lot of words.

One of the reason so many words get bandied about is that every-one capable of speech uses them. Preachers, teachers, politicians, and authors all deal in words. So do doctors, lawyers, bankers, carpenters, Nothing so dominates our waking moments as do words. We use them to communicate our thoughts and our feelings, to give both instruction and direction, and to ask and answer the questions in our lives.

And not only do we communicate with words, but with words we can create images of beauty and wonder or we can tell lies that distort and deceive. Words can be used to define reality or to create illusions which deny its very existence. They can enlighten the mind or spread confusion and chaos throughout the world. Words have the power to heal an aching heart or to pierce another's soul like a poisoned dart. Words also, once uttered, can never be taken back but take on a life of their own over which we can no longer exercise control. Words make up the songs of angels as well as the most vulgar of curses. Given their powerful potential for good or ill, we are all well advised to think before we speak.

There was a time when words were taken much more seriously than they are today; a time when a person was considered to be only as trustworthy as his or her word. Deals were made, business was conducted, and people lived and died on the strength of their word. One of the worst insults one could suffer in the Old West was to be called a liar because that meant that your word was no good and you couldn't be trusted, and since most business was sealed with a word and a handshake, the integrity of one's word was of major importance.

Today, anyone attempting to do business on the reliability of someone else's word alone might be considered foolhardy and naive. That's because our society no longer operates on the assumption that someone's word is trustworthy without it first being scrutinized, notarized and legalized by at least two attorneys and then signed in triplicate by all parties involved. Instead of beginning with the assumption that someone is trustworthy, we now begin with the assumption that they are not, and then proceed accordingly.

But whenever we begin by thinking that someone else's word is not trustworthy we run the risk of becoming either the perpetrator or victim of doubt and suspicion. That can cloud our understanding, distort our perception, disrupt our sense of community, and dull our capacity to feel compassion for another person. Now living like that may be the "way of the world" as we have made it, but it is not how we have been called to live as followers of God's Truth and Light. As followers of Jesus' Way, we are called to live according to the example set by the One whose birth we celebrated just last Sunday --the One in whom God's Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. Helen Kromer, back in 1961, paraphrased our text for this morning in a poem called, *The Word*. Here is what she wrote\*:

"I open my mouth to speak and the word is there,  
formed by the lips, the tongue, the organ of voice --  
formed by the brain transmitting the word by breath.  
I open my mouth to speak and the word is there, traveling between us,  
caught by the organ of hearing, the ear,  
transmitting the thought to the brain through the word.  
Just so do we communicate, you and I,  
the thought from one mind leaping to another,  
so that we know, and are known, through the word.  
But let me speak to a very young child, and my words mean nothing,  
for the child does not understand my language.  
And so I must show her.  
'This is your foot,' I say,  
'it is meant for walking.'  
I help the child up.  
'Here is the way to walk.'  
And one day, walking takes shape in that child's brain, with the word.  
Now, God had something to say to us,  
but the words meant nothing for we did not know God's language.

And so we were shown.  
'This is the image, the thought in my mind;  
A human being as I mean a human being to be: loving and serving.  
I have turned this image and thought into flesh.  
Now my Word has shape and form and substance to travel between us.  
Let him show forth love, till one day  
loving takes shape in your brain  
with the word.'"

In the midst of a world where words are cheap and deeds are often hidden has come the One whose Word was and is proclaimed as being trustworthy and true. Through the person of Jesus we are not only told that God loves and forgives us, but God demonstrates it! From the manger bed at Christmas to the empty tomb at Easter, we discover that what God says, God does. God's Word and God's deed are one and the same.

That means that the Word of the still-speaking God is not just a word *about* love, it is Love itself! It is not merely a word *about* life, but by it and through it we receive Abundant Life! It is not just a word *about* forgiveness and reconciliation, it is God's grace poured out upon all of us that restores us to full community! When God speaks, something happens! That is the witness of our text, it is the testimony of the saints, and it is the experience of those who know themselves to have been named and claimed by that Word--which will not be silenced or rendered impotent, for God's Word is a public word meant for all the world to hear and to experience!

If our words, yours and mine, are to have any power: if they are to serve love rather than hate; if they are to be words of life instead of death; if they are to encourage hope instead of sowing seeds of despair, then they too must be one with our deeds. Not only must we say what we mean and mean what we say, but we must also DO and BE the very thing we proclaim. For disembodied words are nothing more than puffs of air that are of little more consequence than the belch of a bloated butterfly

Toyohiko Kagawa understood that very well. He was born into great wealth, which he renounced at an early age in order to immerse himself in service to the poor and outcast in his home city of Tokyo. After a lifetime of self-denial and service to others, his body developed a serious stoop, his lungs became tubercular, and his vision became impaired by cataracts in both eyes. During the last year of his life, he was invited to visit Princeton Seminary in this country to deliver the commencement address. When he finished, one student leaned over to another and whispered, "He didn't say much, did he?" A woman, seated behind the two students overheard the remark and leaning forward, said, "Son, a man on a cross doesn't need to say anything."

Kagawa's life and words were one and the same. He bore on his body the marks of the cross which he had taken up and carried on behalf of others. So when he spoke about the Christian's calling to a life of service, he didn't need to use a lot of words to

describe it. The example of his life said it all for him. Nor did Jesus need to use a lot of words on that night when he lifted the bread and wine and said: "Take, eat and drink, this is my body broken for you." He didn't need to use a lot of words, because he *was* the Word, incarnate

Words! I will have used over a thousand of them in this sermon this morning and still won't know if I've communicated what I wanted you to hear. But that is the way it often is with disembodied words, which is what most sermons and speeches are: they're just words that tumble out and hang there, waiting to be embodied in concrete life situations where they can take on shape and form and substance to travel between us.

I don't know what, if any, resolutions you might have made at the beginning of this new year. But if you're looking for one, perhaps there's a particular word that you might want to embody in your own living each and every day of this new year. There are a few words out there that are worthy of a new year's resolution. They're words like LOVE, MERCY, JUSTICE, COMPASSION.

These are words, which when embodied, have the power to heal and restore broken hearts, to reconcile estranged relationships, and to bring peace to troubled and conflicted situations--wherever they may be. They are words that are not empty but which have the shape and form and substance needed to transform both us and the world around us. So if you didn't make any new year's resolutions this year, why not make one today? Make a new year's resolution and resolve to BE the words you speak--and may they be full of grace and truth in order to dwell among us with the power to transform and make things new. Amen.

\*Adapted from the Musical Production  
FOR HEAVEN'S SAKE!  
written by Helen Kromer & Fredrick Silver  
Produced by the North America Ecumenical Youth Assembly  
1961