

*God bless the reading, the hearing, the singing, and the speaking of the Word today.
In Jesus' name, Amen.*

We've all heard the proverb:

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.

This is one of the biggest lies that we teach our children.

Words may not break our bones, but they definitely have the ability to hurt.

Our mental health is at least as important as our physical health, and that mental health can be greatly affected by words spoken to us by other people.

We teach our kids that words can't hurt because we hope that they'll then be able to ignore the playground taunting of bullies at school.

But when the words of those bullies get repeated over and over again, when they show up on social media or in text messages, when they are written on lockers or spoken by people we thought were friends – words can be so hurtful as to put someone's life at risk.

Words matter.

There is a scene in my favorite TV show where two women are talking about being female scientists in a male-dominated field. The first woman asks the second, did your father ever tell you you were pretty? I guess, was the response. Then the first woman asks, did your father ever tell you you were smart? Oh yes, replied the second woman, all the time.

The point being, it was easy for that second woman to imagine herself doing whatever she put her mind to. The words she heard growing up had made her self-confident.

The first woman was only ever told she was pretty as a child, so she thought the only things she'd ever be good at were those that required her to use her looks to get things. Becoming a confident professional was a harder journey for her than for that other woman.

Words matter.

It isn't the things that go into our mouths that defile us – it isn't important ultimately, whether we eat kosher or vegan or organic or gluten-free – what is more important is what comes out of our mouths. In today's world as in Jesus', people make moral claims based on dietary choices.

But diet isn't as important as speech.

Our words are the measure by which we will be judged.

Words can change our point of view.

If, for example, we only use male pronouns and language to refer to God, we start to assume that God must actually be male. Even if we don't believe that God is a man, we recoil against the idea that God has feminine attributes. We find it strange when someone uses female pronouns in reference to God.

We know, intellectually, that God supersedes gender, but we are still uncomfortable with expansive language used to describe the divine.

This is why it is so important to go ahead and *use* that expansive language. Because words are powerful, and they influence how we think.

Expansive language for humankind is important too.

"Mankind" doesn't include women.

"Brothers and sisters" doesn't include gender non-binary siblings.

The language that we use is important, whether we are referencing God or one another.

It is so easy to label a group of people in order to make it easier to refer to them as something other than us.

When we label people, we make it easier for ourselves to declare ourselves different from them.

And if we're different from them, we usually consider ourselves to be better than them.

And if we're better than them, then it's easy for us to dismiss them en masse.

This is where prejudice comes from. This is how systems of oppression are born.

It all begins with the words we use.

Words matter.

Words matter when they are spoken in hate.

If someone speaks a racial slur or shouts a racist slogan, you can be sure that their words are showing their true colors.

If someone tells a racist joke, those words are perhaps even more important. Most people know that overt racist speech isn't socially acceptable, but they might let you get a glimpse at their internal prejudice when they tell a slightly off-color joke. That joke matters.

Those words coming out of someone's mouth, regardless of how harmless their intent, can still cause harm. *The intent, ultimately, doesn't matter.* The reality is what matters. And the reality is that inappropriate words were spoken. And those words are powerful.

Those words can shape opinions, behaviors, policies and laws. And this is why, even when they don't seem violent, words that are spoken in hate must be challenged.

Words matter when they are spoken to *combat* hate.

At a protest or rally, if one side is chanting hateful things, the other side can try to down them out with words of love.

But most of us encounter the opportunity to combat hate more frequently at our family meals, during conversations with colleagues, or in line at the grocery store. When we hear someone talking about "those people," referencing a "bad neighborhood," or discussing "inner-city problems" – is that person just using code words to refer to people of color? These code words are just as bad as Jesus calling the Canaanite woman a dog. They are unacceptable.

What about when someone makes fun of someone who can't speak English well?

I recently heard a quote: never make fun of someone who speaks broken English. It means that they speak another language fluently.

What about sexist speech? When a man won't respect a woman who turns down his advances until he learns that she has a boyfriend, that man isn't respecting the woman at all – he is respecting what he sees as the property of another man. Women are not property.

Whether we are combating sexism, racism, xenophobia, homophobia, or any other prejudice – our words are incredibly powerful when we speak out *against* someone else's words of hate.

Our words of inclusion and love can become more powerful than the hate speech, if only we persist in speaking them.

Today's Gospel story reminds us of the importance of calling a thing what it is.

The Canaanite woman does this. She calls out Jesus as a hypocrite.

Basically she says, the power of God isn't finite like the amount of food at a table would be. So use some of your infinite power to help me, just as you have helped others, some of whom haven't even asked you for healing.

And Jesus hears her, and changes his mind.

All around us, in this country today, people are publicly spouting white supremacist viewpoints. They are chanting Nazi slogans and making racist remarks on Twitter, in press conferences, and around the dinner table.

The remarks around the dinner table are just as harmful as the ones published in newspapers and broadcast on television. Maybe more so.

It is time to call that out. Like the Canaanite woman, we need to assert that such language is wrong. It is unfaithful and ungodly.

And we can pray that we will be heard, as the woman was, and that the people in our lives will change their minds, as Jesus did.

In the case of the Canaanite woman, she had the courage to speak out for justice because it related directly to the life or death of someone she loved. If she hadn't spoken out, her daughter may have died.

In the case of you and me, we need to find the courage to speak out, recognizing that whether we do or don't is related directly to the life or death of people we love.

If I don't speak out, I am putting at risk the lives of Grayson and Gavin, two sweet little boys whose father, Adam, is one of my closest friends from grad school. Adam is black, as are his sons. He has confided to me that he is worried about raising sons in this society in which black men and boys are killed and incarcerated at rates astronomically higher than the general population.

My words have the power to make a better world for them.

If I don't speak out, I am complicit in the racial profiling that happened when Pastor Stephen and I walked in to a gas station together. I was using the ATM, because we were having lunch together and it was my turn to pay. The cashier's eyes didn't leave Pastor Stephen for a moment while he was in the store. It seemed like he was afraid that this black man was going to steal from him, or perhaps from me once my ATM withdrawal was complete. My words could change that cashier's perspective.

If you don't speak out, whose life do you risk?

Words matter.

They are powerful.

They have the ability to change this world in which we live.

So today, *I speak out*.

From this pulpit, I follow the example of the Canaanite woman, who challenged Jesus and convinced him to change his mind.

From this pulpit, I embody the words of Jesus when he told us that what comes out of our mouth proceeds from the heart.

What is on my heart today, dear ones in Christ, is that *our words matter*.

It is long past time for us to use our words to speak out *against* hate and *in favor* of love.

For too many years, the church has been silent about racism and other systems of oppression. For even longer, the church has been complicit in such systems.

Today I say, *no more!*

We can no longer be silent, and we will no longer be complicit! It is time to proclaim the Gospel of Christ, that all of humanity has been created in the image of God, and that oppression of any person or any group is un-Christian and unfaithful and un-Godly.

Perhaps you are one of those who has been silent or complicit in the past.

As a called and ordained minister of Christ, dear ones, I hereby declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins!

So now – as you have received God’s grace, as you have heard God’s Word, and as you have understood the importance of our own words as they are used to hurt or heal – dear ones in Christ, I hereby commission you.

Go.

Go into the world and use your words for good.

Go to your family gatherings and don’t ignore that off-color joke.

Go onto social media outlets and don’t stand for people bullying one another.

Go to a protest or a counter-protest, and use your words to proclaim love.

Drown out the words of hate.

When Jesus spoke in favor of inclusion, the Pharisees were offended.

Too bad.

Speaking the truth will sometimes offend people. That is not a reason to stop speaking truth, as Jesus modeled for us.

It is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.

But it is also what comes out of the mouth that has the power to heal, restore, rebuild, and make the world a better place.

In the name of Jesus, and following the example of our Savior, who *changed his mind* when confronted with his own prejudice – I ask you, today, to join me in using your words for good.

Together, let us make this world a better place.

Please pray with me.

Loving God, your house welcomes all people.

Help us show your love and grace to all people.

Give us courage to speak out on behalf of those who are oppressed.
Through us, gracious Savior, make the world a better place for all races and creeds,
nationalities and genders. In your name we pray.
Amen.