

“USE YOUR WORDS”

Not long ago, when I was a teenager, I was at church one evening. There was some sort of big event in the fellowship hall; the place was packed. I was out in the hall, when the phone rang, so I answered it.

The caller said that the weather service has issued a Tornado Warning for the area, and that the people should be told about it.

Tornado warnings are not that uncommon in Ohio.

I knew I wasn't going to be the one to make the announcement, so I thought, “who would be the best choice?” I decided that since Wilbur is the music director and can sing loudly that I would ask him to announce the warning.

I went to Wilbur and shared the news from the caller, so that he could inform the crowd.

Wilbur went over to the microphone, and loudly yelled, “There is a Tornado Coming; Everybody Leave.”

There was a mad rush to vacate the building,..... and the Tornado never came.

No only did he do a lousy job of presenting the message, but he also got the message wrong.

There is a quite a bit of pressure on a messenger, especially when it includes public speaking.

I've experienced a lot of preachers that must of thought that being loud was good enough.

Even if the message is delivered accurately and properly, listeners tend to connect the message to the spokesperson,..... and thus the plea, when the news is not desirable: “Don't shoot the messenger.”

Moreover, in the church domain, we demand that a spokesperson “practices what she preaches.” Yet the Biblical message is often a call to be in the **process** of reaching for God's way, such as following Christ, and the messenger is not Christ, ...merely the presenter.

Therefore, the message has to be diluted.... or... the spokesperson has to do a great job of pretending..... or ... hope and pray for understanding and mercy.

Our call to worship, from Psalm 40, was the Psalmist sharing his anguish of faithfully presenting God's message of salvation—a message that is much bigger than the messenger.

Verse 11 is the plea of a fearful speaker, “Do not, O Lord, withhold your mercy from me; let your steadfast love and faithfulness keep me safe forever.”

Public declarations can truly be a risky and unnerving experience.

Declaring marriage vows have brought many quivering knees to the ground.

It makes sense to be silent and keep people guessing, instead of speaking out and removing all doubt.

Yet,..... God wants salvation proclaimed,... and God calls individuals to be public spokespersons,.....and the people cry out, “Better you than me,.... but watch what you say.”

In our Isaiah passage, the writer presents such a calling, and it was much like Jeremiah's.

God's selection process leaves much to be desired, but at least there is training and preparation.

Verse 2 is about that learning / *sharpening* process.

We need not be too alarmed about the simile to military tools. Much like today, the highest level of resources and skills went into making weapons. They were / are **the** examples of extreme “wow” technology.

The writer is saying that he went through a great deal of training and learning, much like the exhaustive work in making a sharp sword.

And, during that learning process, he was nurtured and protected by God. The reference to being hid by God connects to a mother bird hiding her young under her wing.

As one called to public speaking, I appreciated that verse.

I used to be terrified to speak in front of an audience. I nearly flunked speech class because I was so nervous speaking to the class.

Moreover, I was terrible in English. My vocabulary was limited, and my spelling and grammar was worse.

Yet, for some crazy, unknown to me reason, God called me to be a preacher, which included going to school for six more years. I needed all the education I received, and I Did work very hard at learning and sharpening the skills necessary to faithfully speak in public.

My sister-in-law used to tease me about those “educated people”, and that baffled me..... because..... she may of **not needed** all that extra training, but I sure did. I needed to change in order to be what I was called to be,... and formal education changed me.

So,... with fear and trepidation I joined the ranks of public speakers.

However,..... the Isaiah passage then states that all of God’s people are to proclaim God’s salvation. We are to be “as a Light to the nations.... to all the earth.”

If this is true,... we can’t be ***the silent in the land***. We are supposed to speak out. Granted not everyone has to learn how to get up and speak to audiences, yet the message is clear..... and please don’t shoot the messenger..... we all have to speak out about God’s way of salvation.

John the Baptist was a messenger. He prepared the way for Jesus.

He was a public spokesperson. He had his congregation, and his message rightly pointed to Christ.

In fact, he literally pointed to Christ.

Last Sunday, was about Jesus being baptized by John. Today’s text is about the next day, and the day after that.

The “next day”, John encountered Jesus, and pointed with his words, the public declaration, “HERE IS THE LAMB OF GOD.”

The declaration / the clarification was important. It needed to be stated to remove all doubt and mystery. He needed to say it.

In the context of that moment, all listening realized that Jesus was the apocalyptic lamb they were looking for. He was God’s **victorious**, suffering servant who would lead God’s flock to salvation. This “Christ”, by his power, his words and influence... will remove what holds us back: our bondage to sinning.

John went on to affirm with words, that Jesus was God’s chosen one.

Again, the next day, when John the Baptist, who was with two of his own disciples, saw Jesus walk by, he exclaimed.... in words... the same message—clarifying who Jesus was.

There is a risk to speaking out. John's disciples left him to follow Jesus, which was the right thing to do, but it did mean John was losing the protection of being surrounded by a group.

The two followed Jesus, but the physical act of following was not enough. Jesus wanted them to clarify in words what they were doing. He asked them, "What are you searching for / what is it that you desire?"

They awkwardly replied, "Where are you staying" – meaning we want to go there with you, too.

Jesus' answered defined the process of following by saying, "Come and See."

Come and see: Wow, there is a lot of meaning in those three words.

It catches the essence and the faith required in following Christ.

Andrew, one of the followers, is the first disciple to proclaim Christ.

He tells his brother Simon, "We have FOUND the Christ."

Again, just a simple sentence, yet so profound.... and powerful.

Simon is presented to Jesus, who checks him out with discerning eyes, and surprisingly declares, "You were Simon. You are now to be called Peter." From then on, each time Peter heard his name, he would be reminded that Jesus gave him that name – his new identity. One word, and so meaningful!

Words are very powerful.

They can be mightier than the sword.

Words can encourage and comfort. They can inspire..... or.....

They can tear down and destroy.

Divisive and caustic words can inflame anger and hatred, and even perpetuate violence,..... as some have insinuated Sarah Palin's vitriolic words have done.

Words have meanings, and they define everything under the sun.

Those definitions can stand alone. They present a message, such as the "Stop" on a stop sign. A message in words, contain varies types and levels of meaning, but the real power of words is in the formation, the context and in the reception. And, that means more than just the emotional element poured into words.

As the John passage presented, words bring clarity..... to the one saying the words,..... and to the listener.

This past Summer, when my grandson was here, he was still transforming into the world of structured language. At times he would yell out a noise.... or cry.... or just point, and my daughter would say to him, "Sasha, use your words."

Once, he stated what he wanted, we could respond, and he felt "heard" / understood. There was clarity.

*Words can do that. They can bring clarity.

We've heard it said that "Actions speak louder than words", and that may be true.

Yet, the actions may NOT be clearly understood, by the doer or the observer, without words.

Words force us to engage in the message / the action, and words present a clearer and more meaningful message.

*We need both words and action, and for the most part we affirm that.

Today, we received Karl as a new member. The declaration of membership is a statement of commitment, trust and love. Karl could have just engaged in the life of the church / just been present, as the two disciples of John were willing to do,.... and we could have assumed he is one of us / part of our group, yet not know for sure.

Today, Karl made a declaration,... in words, and so did we, and now we KNOW his and our intent... and desire. We understand.

And, to be sure, the requirement to publically make that statement demanded contemplation and soul searching. Words can do that to us. Words are powerful.

That is why we say wedding vows. The words force us to engage in the message / to own the message. Words are powerful!

Merely hanging around,.... just doesn't have the clarity and power of intent....that saying the words, "I DO" possesses.

However, removing the mystery of ambiguity can be risky and difficult.

We Mennonites, for a long time, relied on our actions to speak for us. It was safer that way. We could believe in pacifism and hold dear Christ way of peace and justice, without risky the challenges and even ridicule by telling everybody what we believed in.... and why we were doing actions of kindness.

Doing Peace in the Public Square has meant that churches, must first engage in the meaning.... before they can publically say it, and that has proven to be painful for numerous congregations.

For many, Pacifism and God's compassionate justice is a nice ideal,..... but.... not actually real enough to own it with words.

And once it is put in words, then the cloud of mystery is removed. The whole community will have clarity,.... and they may even regard us differently.

Our church has already declared we are a peace church. We say that, in words, on our sign out front.

Yet, in other matters..... we'd rather rely on our actions to vaguely speak for us.

We **are** a gracious "affirming church, and it is about time that we say that in words: that we are an "Affirming church", instead of placating phantoms with the diffident cloud of ambiguity.

We are an affirming church.

I've been told that we prairie people are somewhat reserved. We are not comfortable displaying our feelings or declaring our opinions with words.

If that is the case, then we better examine the behaviour altering influence in the colour GREEN, because when the Riders are playing, WE are NOT the quiet in the land!

We know how to use words.

To be sure, football is one thing, our personal feelings and deeply held beliefs are another thing altogether.

To place it safe and be good consumers, our culture tells us to say it "with flowers"... or diamonds..... or whatever.....

Tangible gifts are like actions,..... they NEED Words!

Because of love, a parent may frequently driver her child to various sporting events, but the child may not get it or understand it or.... receive the full message without the words.

Use your words.

Say, "I'm proud of you" and "I love you and I want to be your personal chauffeur. You are worth my time."

Because of love, a parent may chose a different lifestyle or spent time helping with homework, but the child may mess the full impact of the message without the words.

Use your words.

Say, "You are very special to me" and "I love you and want to spend time with you. I care for you"

Because of love, a grandparent may bite his tongue or tolerate neglect.

Even adult children need to hear the words: "I love you..... I respect you.... and, I'm patient, but I still want to be in your life."

In all of our relationships, we need to give the gift of clarity....and use our words.

Words confirm things, and saying the words, choosing the words, helps us sort things out. Words bring clarity.

That's why we pray.

God knows our thoughts and our spirit, yet using words helps us understand. Words bring clarity.

When I was in Kansas, I counselled a couple who were going through some marital / relationship problems.

She was feeling neglected, unappreciated and unloved.

He was feeling tormented, annoyed and misunderstood.

As we talked, he reminded her of all the things that he did for her, such as working hard to help pay the bills, taking out the garbage and buying her nice things and so on. He pointedly noted that those actions should speak for themselves, and that she should understand why he did all that stuff.

She asked, "Then why don't you tell me why you do all that? Why don't you say, "I love you?"

He mumbled that he wasn't a talkative person, that he just wasn't comfortable sharing his feelings.

I asked, "That makes sense, and so that means that you never share your angry feelings or state when your perturbed or upset with her?"

He didn't respond, but she did.

Strange how we find it easier to use words as weapons for destruction, than for encouragement, tenderness.... and heartfelt love.

I suggested that each of them use words to say "Thanks" ... and to tell each other that "I love you."

Later, I asked him how it was going, and if he was telling her that he loved her.

He humbly confessed, "I was going to.....but I couldn't..... because I don't think I do."

Using words can bring clarity.

God has called us to proclaim God's message of salvation.

Some are public speakers, but most are not, even so, all of us are called to not only physically follow Christ's way, but to also declare Christ to those around us.

God's message of salvation is Christ: both words and action.

We have encountered God's amazing love, and we have been touched / changed by God's Spirit of love.

And, if we really believe that,..... then we can say it.