

USING WORDS  
[written in oral form]

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 had issued a Tornado Warning for the area, and that the people should be told about it.

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 was 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."

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

Not only did he do a lousy job of presenting the message, but he also got the message wrong.

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

*I've experienced a lot of preachers, in the past, 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, there is the demand that a spokesperson "practices what she/he 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, to practice what you preach, the message would have to be diluted.... or... the spokesperson has to do a great job of pretending..... or ... hope and pray for understanding and mercy.

I assure you, the Gospel message is much bigger and better than me.

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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."

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Public declarations can truly be a risky and unnerving experience.

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

Yet,..... God wants God's message of love, righteousness and justice proclaimed.  
God does call individuals to be public spokespersons, such as Isaiah and Jeremiah,..... Yet God expects all of us to use our words, too.

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As one called to public speaking, I appreciate Isaiah's and Jeremiah's calling.  
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.

Yet, for some crazy, unknown to me reason, God called me to be a preacher, which included going to school for four 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. However, God immediately removed my fear of public speaking when I agreed to be a minister.

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Some are called, but as Isaiah 49 points out, 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 a large audience, yet the message is clear..... and please don't shoot the messenger..... we all have to speak out about God.

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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.

Today's text from John takes place the day after John baptized Jesus--the "next day".

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.

Words give clarity, and that makes them powerful. Words endure.

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In the context of that moment, all listening heard that Jesus was the apocalyptic lamb/the suffering servant/ the Messiah they were looking for. He was God's **chosen one** 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 destruction and selfishness.

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

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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--The Son of God.

*There is a risk to speaking out.* John’s disciples left him to follow Jesus, which was the right thing to do, YET 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?”

Just doing / just following wasn't good enough. They needed to show and clarify their commitment with Words!

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

Jesus’ answer 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.*

*Come and See*

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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!

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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 Donald Trump's vitriolic words have done.

And, Words can reveal one's personal bias, as a judge in Alberta has/is learning.

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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.

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

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I remember when my grandson was much younger, when he was still transforming into the world of structured language.

During that stage, 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.

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Our litanies and the calls to worship have carefully chosen words.

The blessing for the nurture volunteers was elevated with words, instead of giving a mere pat on the back.

Likewise, we honour the reception of new members with a litany of words,... and we want those about to be baptized to declare in words their decision to follow Christ. We want to hear it, and the speaker needs to say it.

We could just engage in the life of the church / just been be present, as the two disciples of John were willing to do,... and we could assume everyone is part of our group and committed to following Christ,... yet we would not know for sure.

A declaration,... in words makes it clear. The words inform us of the intent... and desire. We understand through words.

And, to be sure, the requirement to publically make that statement / that vow and commitment demanded personal contemplation and soul searching.

**Words can do that to us. Words are powerful.**

That is why we say wedding vows. The words/ the stated vows forces us to engage in the message and to own the message, without ambiguity. Words are powerful!

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

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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 to us Christ's way of peace and justice, without risking the challenges and ridicule by telling everybody what we believed in.... and why we were doing actions of kindness.

I wish every Mennonite church would boldly declare, in words, that we are a Peace Church. Having a visible sign that states *we are a peace church; we will not fight in wars* would be extremely profound.

It would force us and all who see it to know our values, and that we value our beliefs enough to risk the reactions.

Moreover, many who dream of a better way, may find such a statement hopeful.

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In addition, as difficult as the process was, it is good that we came up with a Welcome Statement. Simply acting welcoming leaves room for fearful doubt. We struggled with the words,...so that others need not struggle with ambiguity.

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To play 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!

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Because of love, a parent may frequently drive 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 miss 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 to understand. Words bring clarity.

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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.*

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

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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."

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Using words can bring clarity.

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It's risky to state, in words, what we believe and how we feel... because words are that powerful. And, when we says things that we don't believe and that doesn't reveal our inner self,....then it shows. We know.... and others catch on, too.

That is the reason church people sometimes are labelled as "hypocrites."

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Dare we state that we are committed followers of Christ?

Can we declare that we love God more than anything?

Dare we share our hesitations and fears,....as we seek to embrace God's way of peace and justice?

Can we say, "I love you?"

Can we put our truth into words,.....and are we ready for such power?