

Words

John 11:1-44

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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Lent 5

Sometimes words seem so cheap. Have you noticed this? Once I attended a conference where we were treated to a guest preacher who had been flown in from several states away. He was fairly well-known with wide name recognition. Early in the worship service we in the audience sat expectantly, waiting until the moment when we could hear this man speak to us. When he started speaking, we were not disappointed. He was certainly a dynamic speaker. His arms and hands moved constantly. He paced back and forth across the stage. He raised and lowered his voice at all the right places, sometimes almost whispering and sometimes almost shouting. I wondered if he had trained to be an actor sometime in his life. After 20-25 minutes he ended the sermon with a flourish and sat down, his forehead sweating from the physical exertion. We sang a hymn, received a benediction, and then got out of our seats to go to the next event in the conference.

We had been treated to a good show, but something was wrong about that sermon. I felt it, even though I couldn't quite describe what was bothering me. Something was missing. As I exited the room, I heard two other people discussing the sermon who sounded as troubled as I felt. One of them turned to the other and said, "That was quite a performance. But he didn't really say anything. His sermon was full of clichés that had no substance. His words were mostly empty."

"Yes," I thought to myself, "that's exactly right. The preacher was dynamic, but he didn't say anything. The sermon was hollow, devoid of significant meaning."

Sometimes we complain that government officials and corporate bureaucrats can talk for long periods of time and not really say much of substance.

That may be true, yet it can also happen in the church, as I found out at that conference. Words can become cheap. We can blast a fire hydrant of words, yet say nothing important. Perhaps we've all experienced this on the receiving end. We hear someone hurl words at us, or we read a book that goes on interminably, and we wonder where the substance is.

By contrast we've all had experiences when words are loaded with meaning. In these experiences just a few words change the trajectory of our lives. Consider these situations where words have enormous power.

- In a delivery room, a sweaty woman leans back against the pillows, while a joyful midwife says, "It's a girl!"
- Walter Cronkite, news anchor for CBS, breaks into a TV show and says, "The president has been shot."
- A couple stands in a church sanctuary full of witnesses and says, "I, Sam, take you, Matilda"
- The phone rings. You pick it up and hear, "There's been an accident. She's in a coma."
- After a nasty and exhausting fight, you and he sit across the room from each other on your respective sofas, waiting silently to see what will happen next. Then you hear him say, "I forgive you."

The context where words are spoken matters very much. The words "I'm sorry," said after bumping a stranger on the sidewalk, merely mean something like "I didn't mean to touch you. It was an accident." The two of you walk on and the incident is forgotten within a minute or two. But when you utter those same words "I'm sorry" to your best friend with tears in your eyes after a painful conversation, they carry much more heft. They mean something like: "Our relationship is very important to me and the pain I caused you has now become my pain as well." In that situation, those two words "I'm sorry" will probably be remembered for years

afterward. Such words linger in the mind, shaping memory and character. Context matters.

The Bible has both types of words, the hollow and the meaningful. Remember the friends of Job? They spew words at him for more than thirty chapters, yet those mountains of words gave Job no comfort. In fact, they made his suffering worse. They were wasted words, not worth the breath it took to say them or the concentration it took to understand them.

By contrast, other biblical words carry tremendous power:

- Let there be light!
- Fear not! For I am with you.
- Your sins are forgiven.
- Take up your mat and walk.
- Feed my sheep.

Notice how brief and pungent these sentences are. Each of them contains only three to seven words. Such sentences mark turning points in a person's life. A person who hears a sentence like these might legitimately feel that his or her life can be divided into two parts, before sentence and after sentence. When Ruth told her mother-in-law Naomi, "your people shall be my people," those six words radically changed her life (Ruth 1:16). Before them she was Moabite; after them she was Jewish. Uttering those six words thrust her into a trajectory where she moved to Bethlehem, met Boaz, got married, had a son, and eventually was known as the great-grandmother of King David. Had she not pronounced those words, none of those events would have happened.

In today's story about Lazarus, Jesus utters some pithy and powerful sentences which alter the emotional landscape. I'll name four:

- "Your brother will rise again." (v. 23)
- "I am the resurrection and the life." (v. 25)

- “Lazarus, come out!” (v. 43)
- “Unbind him and let him go.” (v. 44)

These electrifying words change family dynamics. They switch mourning into joy, resentment into gratitude. The funeral becomes a party.

The Bible has many texts where similarly pungent words alter the course of events. Even Paul, who in my opinion sometimes slips into excessive wordiness that leaves my brain spinning, nevertheless has some zingers.

I think of Romans 8:1:

- “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.”

Or 1 Corinthians 3:11, a favorite of Menno Simons:

- “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.”

Galatians 3:28:

- “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Or Philippians 2:5:

- “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.”

Even these zingers, compact though they may be, are still somewhat longer—at 12 to 29 words each—than other concise statements in biblical literature. In Paul’s defense, he often dictated his letters to an amanuensis, a scribe, rather than taking stylus in hand and physically writing them himself. If you’ve ever tried dictation, then you know it easily leads to an expansive style of communication.

Still, the Bible has thousands of crisp sentences that may amend and alter the course of one’s life. This is one reason why God’s people respect the power of words. We know from the Bible and from our own experience that in certain

contexts words carry enormous power. Words can terrify us, send us into weeping, embolden us, heal us, inspire us, shake us up, liberate us, or affect us in hundreds of other ways. I remember well the night long ago when Jenny uttered two words to me: “I’m pregnant.” In our seven-year marriage we had developed certain patterns and expectations between us. We were in a mostly comfortable routine with each other. When she announced the pregnancy that resulted in Peter, I was shocked, anxious, terrified, grateful, disoriented. My perception of our lives changed in that moment. I knew that from then on, life would be different.

This is what happened to Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. The words “Lazarus, come out!” reshaped their lives. This encounter with Jesus sent them down a new path.

When has something like this modified your life or the lives of people you love? What were the words? When did an encounter with God, or with one of God’s representatives, send you along a new trajectory?