

Words Matter

John Wilkinson
Third Presbyterian Church
September 16, 2018
James 3:1-12 and Mark 8:27-38

SIX WORD MEMOIR PROJECT IN WORSHIP...

Someone read this morning's cover quotation – Joseph Campbell's assertion that "if you're going to have a story, have a big story, or none at all" and asked "What if I don't have a big story," they asked, "You do," I said. "We all do." And we do. Created in God's image, we all have big stories.

One of the tasks of this Year of Stories is to first claim, then proclaim, then even share, our big stories, and to listen to the big stories of others.

That will happen in many ways. One way will happen right now. It's called a six-word memoir, and is something of a phenomenon. Google it – not right now, but Google it. It's simple. Six words. We've included a handout on which to do this old school, sitting here now, but you can do it in other ways. You can share it, or not. There are some examples on the reverse side of the page. Here are a few more:

- "It all changed in an instant"
- "Family portrait: everyone smiles but me."
- "Did what I was supposed to."
- "Happy, sad, angry, confident, really happy."
- "Unsure, but you would never know. "
- Activist and writer Gloria Steinem – "Life is one big editorial meeting."
- Actress Molly Ringwald – "Acting is not all I am."

- Stephen Colbert – “Well, I thought it was funny.”

You get the point. Now let’s do it. They needn’t be finished products, but I encourage you to give it a try. We will take about 4 or 5 minutes, and yes, I’ve adjusted the sermon length accordingly!

Words matter. They do now, in our Twitter obsessed, unfiltered, reactive culture. But they have always mattered. John’s gospel – “in the beginning was the Word...” In our Year of Stories, claiming that we have a story matters, but telling it will as well, as well as how we tell it. While we tell it with the living of our days, we also tell it with words.

“Tell me a story” is such a powerful invitation – whether from a grandchild to a grandparent or a counselor to a patient or a friend to a friend or a student to a teacher. Tell me a story. With words. So words matter.

Words can heal, or divide. They can pave the way, or they can muddy the waters. They can clarify, or they can obfuscate. You get the point. The power of words as a vehicle for the power of story.

Our tradition has sometimes invested so much in words, in parsing theological technicalities that have confused, in the least, and left people in and out, in seeming contradiction to the gospel invitation. Blood has been spilled over the words of faith. So yes, they matter.

That they matter is considered in the letter of James. The tongue is a fire, James writes, with power disproportionate to the body itself. Once the tongue, once words, becomes out of control, it can be evil, a deadly poison. This sounds harsh, but we also know it to be true, do we not.

But with that same tongue we can also bless God – “from the same mouth comes blessing AND cursing,” giving us a moral choice. And we are to choose the good word to say.

Nathan Willowby writes that “It’s often said that the pen is mightier than the sword, but James offers a slightly different rendering; the tongue is more powerful than the fist.”

Daniel Clendenin writes that "With our words we name the world and each other, and at least in some sense our naming creates a genuine reality. Once our speech and narratives take hold, they have a tremendous power and tenacity for good or evil."

Words have power, James is saying, the power to do bad, evil, and the power to do good. Words matter, and it's our choice.

How they matter is the subject of Jesus' interaction with the disciples that we encounter in Mark's gospel. They are walking, on the move, and Jesus poses a simple question, that is really not so simple. "Who do people say that I am?" A discussion follows.

Then an even deeper question, that gets to the heart of the matter. "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered him, "You are the Messiah." An apparent silent affirmation follows, then an admonition to maintain silence about the whole thing.

His teaching continues, about his impending and necessary death. Peter and he get into a kind of debate, a rather heated battle of words, and Jesus rebukes him.

Then to the crowd, and to us, he issues this challenging invitation: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." Then, to underscore his point, and this morning's, he says that "*...Those who are ashamed of me and of my words ... of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.*"

That is to say, I say what I mean and I mean what I say, so to follow me is not only about me, but my message. The man, this one called Messiah, and what he does AND what he says, all inextricably interconnected, which means that following him is to embrace the entirety of the witness, person and action and message.

That means for us no separation either, about him, or about us. To take up our cross makes a difference in how we live, and how we live is reflected in our words

and our actions, a holistic and integrated call to follow. Faithfulness expressed in how we live, and faithfulness expressed in what we say, and how we say it.

Karoline Lewis writes that “Who you say Jesus is, is who you have decided to be. You can’t answer Jesus’ inquiry without revealing who you are... Jesus’ question is not a test. It’s not about getting the answer right. It’s the moment when you come face-to-face with your own commitment, your own discipleship, your own identity. It’s the moment when you have to admit to what extent how you follow Jesus actually connects with some sort of confession of who you believe Jesus to be...In the end, ‘Who do you say that I am?’ is an invitation to meaningful ... reflection; an invitation to conversation around our (faith) commitments...an invitation to discussion around the correlation between who we are and who we need Jesus to be.”

Lewis concludes: “‘Who do you say that I am?’ is also a question we should ask of others, of ourselves. Who, indeed, will people say we are? Are we willing to ask the question? Or do we stay silent, afraid of what people might say, perhaps worried about what truth might get uttered?”

Words matter, even the words we say about Jesus as we seek to follow him. Francis of Assisi was reported to have said: “Preach the gospel, and if necessary, use words,” seeming to say that talk is cheap, that actions really do speak louder than words.

But words speak as well. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once said that "Speech has power. Words do not fade. What starts out as a sound, ends in a deed."

Our tongue has power, whether talking about ourselves, or others, or this conflicted moment in which we find ourselves, or our understanding of faith. May we be mindful of that power, that both the words of our mouths AND the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to God and build the gospel community to which we are called and which is so very needed. Amen.