

Sermon Notes for 10/9/16 (Pentecost 21)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Luke 17:17-19

Theme: THE WORD CALLS TO FAITH AND CREATES FAITH

Hymn: LBW 519 (My Soul, Now Praise Your Maker)

The Point: Whatever else it may accomplish, the Word of God has one distinct purpose: to create faith in the hearts of all who hear it.

Introduction: Words, words, words – we deal with a flood of words, don't we? From the time our clock radios wake us up to news (or the latest songs) to the constant onslaught of emails to the daily conversations at the breakfast table or the water fountain to the Skype meetings with distant work partners to ads that line our sidewalks and highways to the intimate talk of lovers, words are everywhere. I have seen statistics that indicate between 600,000 and one million books are published every year in the United States alone. And studies indicate that working men speak 2000-3000 words each day; the total for women is 10,000 to 20,000. That means that men speak about a million words per year, and women average around 3 million. For just the USA that would amount to about 150 million million (or 150 quadrillion) words spoken by men and 500 quadrillion by women in a year. That is a lot of words, however you cut it.

But at certain times, well-chosen words have greater power than at other times. Think about the creative power behind President Kennedy's pledge to put a man on the moon within the decade of the 60's – or the healing power of the words of President Lincoln spoken at Gettysburg after that horrendous battle. Remember the compelling power of FDR's words as he spoke of the "day that will live in infamy"? What potency the words that constitute the Declaration of Independence had for our country!

There is a word more powerful than any of these words – or any of the other trillions of words spoken around the world today. The Word of God is the most powerful force in this world. While our A-bombs and H-bombs have immense power to destroy, the Word of God has power to transform hearts from hatred of God and antagonism to His cause to become fervent lovers of God and advocates of His purposes. Saul the persecutor encountered God's Word in the flesh as Jesus met him on the Damascus Road, and he became Paul the apostle, church planter and missionary extraordinaire!

That same transformative Word is present in the worship life of God's people. We have noted already (in our earlier reading from "Our Way of Worship") that the worship service has two high points. The first high point is the service of the Word. The other is the service of the Sacrament. However, we really ought not to separate the two, since the Sacrament is actually the Word of the Gospel made visible and tangible. We will get to that more in a coming week. For today we want to think through the high point of the Word in the worship life of God's people.

God's Word has power. This was evident from the very beginning. When there was nothing but God, He spoke, and things happened. "Let there be light" was His very first spoken Word, and at that word light sprang into being. Likewise, on each consecutive day He created one part after another of our incredibly variegated world. But with the crown of His creation, the man and the woman, He consulted within the Godhead before forming man from the dust of the ground and the woman from a rib of the man. He took special pains with this duo because He intended to live in relationship with them. And so it was – until they rebelled against His Word and became enemies of God.

Even then God was at work through His Word to breach the gap between God and His creatures. He came and looked for them when they were determined to hide from Him. He spoke words of rebuke, which were painful and troublesome for them to hear, for those words foretold a life of pain and trouble and grief

and labor for them and all their children. The law of God speaks of and brings about death.

But God did not stop there. He spoke a word of hope also, a word designed to bring life and joy and hope for the future. That word spoke of a deliverer, a conqueror, a victor who would crush the head of the serpentine enemy and bring death to death itself. Yes indeed, that Messiah would also experience the bruising of His heel, but that would not overpower Him. Instead, He would win the final victory, even through His own suffering and dying.

That powerful, transformative Word of God has been present generation after generation. In times past He spoke to His people through the prophets. Of course, not all received that word with faith. Elisha spoke the word of healing, hope and life to Naaman. But Naaman thought he knew better than God's Word. "Why can't I go back home and wash in those cleaner rivers? I thought he would come out (not just send a messenger) and wave his hand over the spot and heal me." It is easy to think that we know better than God. And when Naaman was ready to abandon that word for his own ideas of what healing might involve, his own servants pointed him back to the waters of the Jordan.

They said, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean'?" So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean." Naaman's body was clean. But even more importantly, his heart was knit to the God of Israel through this incident with God's spokesman. God's Word has that kind of power!

Jesus spoke the same word of healing to the ten lepers whom He met on the road to Jerusalem. He told them to show themselves to the priests (who were the group charged with declaring healed lepers to be clean), and on the way there their leprosy left them totally. Sadly, it appears that the full power of that word struck to the heart of only one of those ten, and that one who returned to praise the Lord was a Samaritan. He heard more than a body-healing word. He also heard a soul-cleansing word: "Your faith has made you well." And in that confidence the man walked away from Jesus a changed man.

Even though St. Paul was chained in prison, he testified to Timothy in today's Epistle, "The word of God is not chained." He did not hesitate to speak the Word of truth to those around him, so that even the prison guards and others around Paul heard the Gospel, and many of them came to know Jesus and to be saved. The Word of God has power to change people from disinterested observers to passionate followers of the Savior. And that works wherever the Word is shared, whether in worship services or one to one in conversation. God's Word continues to bring people from darkness to light, from death to life.

Conclusion: Whatever else it may accomplish, the Word of God has one distinct purpose: to create faith in the hearts of all who hear it. That Word is present in this service as well. It works what it promises. The word of absolution, "I forgive you all your sins" is God's declaration that He is at work putting your sins away from you as far as east is from west. The readings from God's Word are chosen to link our hearts with the promises of our gracious Lord. The sermon is designed, at least at its best, to show Jesus to the hearers so that they will trust Him and walk with Him through all of life. May that Word live in you and flow from you to others, that the purpose of God will be fulfilled eternally as He gathers a fellowship from every nation and tongue and language and people! In the strong name of Jesus the living Word, AMEN!