

Weekly Devotion January 11, 2021
Pastor Matthew Woods, Grace Lutheran Church.

“The Spirit of Words”

Many years ago I worked in Yosemite National Park for a summer. I went there as part of A Christian Ministry in the National Parks program. I would conduct services on Sunday mornings at the local campground within the park and occasionally conduct a second service with the whole team at another campground located down in the Valley.

While waiting for one of our afternoon services to start I sat with others who were part of this ministry. One was a woman who had been married to a man who struggled with his faith. I would later learn that this was a delicate topic in their marriage. While we waited for service time, sitting on worn bleacher seats in a wooded amphitheater, another woman none of us knew sat down with us in front. She struck up a conversation about faith. It started off talking about mutually appreciated things like our hope in Jesus. But somewhere within this conversation it was revealed to all of us that this woman’s husband struggled to believe in Jesus.

This lady, who was very fired up about the Lord, launched into a sermon directed at our friend’s husband. With no regard to whom he was sitting with—(we were all friends and believers), this over-zealous woman felt that it was her *job* to “save” the man. For at least ten minutes she talked of the urgency of salvation and how endangered the poor man was of going to hell. We tried to temper this woman but she just kept on coming. She came at that poor man so hard and without any balance of compassion or tact or grace. This man’s wife just broke down in tears knowing that great damage was being done to her husband’s faith. Eventually, she and her husband simply got up and left without a word. Once we and the other five on our team got past being stunned by such a terrible witness, we rallied together to get her to finally stop talking. While many things that she said may have been true there was no love in her words. The spirit in which she witnessed had undone in a matter of minutes what took a long time to build—meaning that trust was built up enough that he was willing to show up to services again.

The spirit in which we use our words can have a profound impact on our effectiveness. God forbid we become an obstacle to the very message that we are trying to communicate. James 1:26 says, “If you claim to be religious but don’t control your tongue, you are fooling yourself, and your religion is worthless.”

Ephesians 4:29-32 is also instructive. ²⁹ Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. ³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. ³¹ Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. ³² Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

That experience in Yosemite was a good lesson for me. First, know your audience. When we share our witness, it works so much better if we take the time to see who we are talking with as a person to be befriended not conquered. Paul did this routinely on his missionary journeys. He made the time to work alongside and get to know each person in each community that he stopped in. He knew the context in which they lived. He took the time to witness with grace and humility, with kindness and compassion. Secondly, Paul never made his conversation about a “win” to put on his resume. He trusted in the Gospel to do its work. He planted the seeds of faith and then got out of the way of the Holy Spirit. Finally, Paul was good

at acknowledging the faith of family members who were believers--like Timothy. Paul praised his mother, Eunice and his grandmother, Lois for instilling faith in Tim. Likewise, I would imagine Paul acknowledging and giving thanks for the faith of this man's wife and five friends represented there. I imagine Paul encouraging us to love the man, urging the man on in the faith, and to trust in the Lord to be the author and finisher of this man's faith walk. Sometimes the hardest to thing to do is to pray and be patient. The zealous woman who came on too strong in her witness at the same time disrespected this man's wife, her faith, and ours. The spirit in which Paul approached his fellow Christians, even the wayward ones like the church in Galatia was always with grace—even when he had to be firm with the foolishness of the Galatians. Yes, that day in Yosemite taught me much and frankly I am still embarrassed when I think of that day.

A spirit of grace and tact in our words will always have a greater chance of being heard even when we are being firm in a rebuke as with Galatia. The Law should always be applied in love as much as the Gospel. Jesus was the master of this; using parables, welcoming children, and even asking for a drink of water from a lonely woman at a well in Samaria. His way of doing things never left people the same. I encourage you to look at Jesus in the Gospels and see the wonderful way in which He engaged people. And finally remember Colossians 4:6 "Let your speech always be gracious, *seasoned with salt*, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person." What good are words that witness if it loses its saltiness? I saw firsthand. Nothing good. And so, I encourage you to fill the spirit of your words, with grace and salt and as grandma taught us, "think before you speak." May God bless your next conversation.

And now the Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face to shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord look on You with His favor and give you His peace in Jesus.

Pastor Matthew Woods
John 3:30