

“The Word”
Rev. Dennis Johnson
John 1:1-9
January 3, 2010

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me. Really? Last Wednesday I had lunch with Hank Disney. He was wearing a new sweater. He told me it was a gift for Christmas and asked me what I thought of it. I told him I didn't like it, the color was wrong for his complexion, and it made him look “physically generous.” (My way of saying “chubby.”)

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.

Every time we speak to someone we make a new beginning. We help to shape and fashion a world; our world and others. In the beginning and the continuing of relationships there are words, words both spoken and unspoken that impact us. There are confirming words, well-intended words that contain the ability to give us hope, life, and courage to undertake the daily challenges of that life.

In the beginning and the continuing of relationships there are also words, infirming words, ones purposely negative that make us physically sick, get us defensive, and drain life from us. Many times they leave our souls hollow.

The gospel of John says that the Word, the Wisdom, The Logic became flesh somehow, and put on our skin. That Word lived among us and spoke words that are around us to this day. In a special way, all words spoken to us become flesh. They become part of us; they are embedded within us and alive in ways we do not anticipate. The Hebrews believed that words spoken had a particular type of life to them. In the first chapter of Genesis before the world is created God broods over the chaos, broods like a mother hen, and a world is born.

John's gospel uses the Greek word Logos, which not only means word, but also means deed, as in enacted deed. God speaks a Word and words. A world filled with order, light, and life is born. In our own lives we create our worlds through the actions and words we speak, both to ourselves and to one another.

Words are the very foundation of our life and love for one another. At my last parish in Stockton, California, I was the volunteer chaplain for the two retirement facilities we built. Inevitably when I held training sessions for volunteers who would visit the residents I would be asked, “What in the world do you say to them?” My simple answer was, to paraphrase Fred Craddock, “Just stick your head in the door, look the resident in the eyes, and say “Good morning, how are you?” Those simple words light up the room, fluff their pillows, and many times make their day - all because you treated them as human beings who are worth the words.

Confirming words are reciprocal. When our family first came to this church, looking for a church home last May, you welcomed us with words spoken and enacted words, through your handshakes.

In Matthew's gospel (12:36, 37) Jesus says that on judgment day each of us are accountable for the words we speak. By our words we will be justified or condemned. I have spoken words to others that I desperately wish I could immediately take back. There are times I've been more of a reactor to others' words than an actor, a genuine person. I've learned to step back from comments. Some of us seem to be nuclear reactors to other people's comments and questions. When we do that, we have little chance of becoming a genuine person. We are many times detonating ourselves over words spoken.

Years ago Father John Sanford wrote a very basic communications book, “Why Am I Afraid to Tell You Who I Am?” His answer is, if I tell you who I am and you don't like me, I have nothing. Words spoken to me long

ago still live within me. Sometimes they seemingly come out of nowhere in the worst of moments. Sometimes I believe that it is God nurturing and especially nudging me, wanting me to deal with those words. Fredrick Buechner says, "If God speaks anywhere, it is into our personal lives that God speaks."

Here is a reply, written by my spouse, Rev. Amy Johnson to "sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me."

Sticks and stones can break my bones. Harsh words leave my heart broken.
Bones will mend, but words offend, long after they are spoken.

I believe that God's Word to us is Jesus of Nazareth. Within the words Christ speaks he asks us to take responsibility for both our spoken words and enacted deeds, understanding that, in a special way, every day is a judgment day on how we treat one another; on how we treat ourselves.

John Wesley was asked what constitutes a Christian? He went on to say "one who is decent to others." Here are a few words for our new year:

Grace. Give yourself the kindness that you extend to others. Many years ago my therapist, after numerous sessions, stopped me in the middle of my speaking. She never did that. But she looked me in the eyes, and spoke these words: "After all this time listening to you, I realize that you give grace to everyone but one person." As naïve as I apparently was, I asked her who this was. She simply said, "You." I was mad and angry at her, and told her so. Why? She was right. Being a perfectionist I was rougher on myself than anyone else. Her words gave me quite a moment of consciousness. Jesus said, "You will know the truth, and it will set you free." And I add, "At first it may make you darn mad."

Hope. Hope is like that little tiny sewing thread (Fred Craddock). My oldest daughter, who will turn 40 this year, had cancer surgery when she was 15. Our surgeon initially said that the surgery should only be a couple of hours. It was over eight hours when our surgeon walked through the doors of the waiting room. My family looked at her intensely as she said "I think we got it all." Now we could have said, "What do you mean, you THINK you got it all? Don't you know, aren't you a specialist?" Instead, all of us in the room erupted in smiles, hugs, and tears of joy. Hope lives on a slender thread.

Model...Not as in a runway model. Our local Veterans For Peace chapter really began with this word. One person early on said, "If we are advocating peace, then we need to live it out, from within, and model it not only in the community, but with one another."

Worry. I'm a worrier by nature. I could make Garrison Keillor blush. Daniel Grippio in his self help "Worry Therapy" book says, "A little worry is like the rain. A little can be good. Too much is destructive." Like a gentle rain, worry can be a word from God, letting us know our life is out of balance and needs fixing. God's word to us is to channel worry in positive directions. I've learned to journal, to write out my worries on paper. Just putting those words in print, in front of me, takes away much of the "awful-izing" power. I try to worry proof my life to the best of my ability.

Transition. The more things change, the more they stay the same. Woodrow Wilson said, "It's not the change that does you in, it is the transition." Transition is different than change. Change is outer, situational, and all around us daily. Transitions speak of our inner ability to let go - our need to end in order to begin anew. Transitions take much more time. John's gospel calls this living life eternal here and now. It is putting on new eyes and seeing beyond the moment.

Not long ago a family moved to a city. They drove around town looking at churches. They stopped at one particular church in the south side of that city. They walked around it, and then noticed an old man in a rocking chair across the street. They walked over to him and asked, "What kind of people go to this church?" The old

man asked “What kind of people were at your last church?” Oh, they were just filled with cliques, always wanting money (they asked at least once a year), and were far too judgmental.

“Well, that's the kind of people who go here.”

A few weeks later another family new to town noticed the old man. They asked him the same question, and he replied with the same question. They answered, “Oh, they were wonderful, supported us even in the worst of our moments. We were loved.” And the old man replied, “Well, that's the kind of people who go here.”

May God give you encouraging and confirming words this New Year. May your light shine through the darkness of daily life.