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The National Presbyterian Church

**“Words, Words, Words”**

John 1:1-14; Proverbs (selected)

David A. Renwick

Let me read you two lists of WORDS.

Here's the first list:

*God, Invest, Medicare, Vote, Leadership, Education, Forward, Business, Health, Fight, Tax, Middle class, Economy, Families, Women, Jobs.*

Here's the second:

*Hope, American Dream, Debt, Freedom, Women, Small Business, Tax, God, Economy, Better, Success, Leadership, Families, Government, Jobs, Business*

I don't know if you can guess where the lists come from? They come from the 2012 Democratic and Republican Conventions, four years ago, and represent the most common words used in the speeches at each convention. (see [www. \\_\\_\\_\\_\\_](http://www.____))

- ½ of the words overlap
- ½ of them are quite different
- All of them were used at least 20 times, and some as many as 80

And, no doubt, these words will not be that much different from the words we'll hear in the next couple of weeks as convention season begins in Cleveland and moves on to Philadelphia.

In fact 100s and thousands of words will be spoken in the coming days

And in the midst of them it's worth praying, as the verse from 1 Timothy on our bulletin cover, commands us to do, for our leaders:

*(1 Timothy 2:1-2 -- <sup>1</sup>First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone, <sup>2</sup>for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.)*

that we will hear some words that will truly inspire and heal, and change things in our nation and world for good.

If there was ever a time when we needed inspiring and healing words, that time is surely right now, when (as one commentator has said recently) all we seem to hear about is crisis on crisis and tragedy on tragedy; so much so -- that at times with each new story in the news it can feel as if the social fabric of the world is simply unraveling

**And make no mistake – words can have enormous power, both for good and for evil: to hasten decay, or to turn a tide.**

Think back to the dark days of WWII before the United States entered the War, at another time – when the social fabric of the world didn't just seem to be unraveling, but actually was! The evil of Nazism was running rampant -- policies of racial superiority and discrimination were justified in order to restore pride to a broken nation – to make Germany great again.

In the midst of the chaos and confusion one voice spoke up and his words -- the words of Winston Churchill – gave strength and power to men and women around the world not only to get (“How will my life improve with this government?”), but to give: in fact, to give even their lives away for what was right.

In May 1940 Churchill said:

*“I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.  
We have before us an ordeal of the most grievous kind.  
We have before us many, many long months of struggle and of suffering . . .  
You ask, what is our aim? I can answer in one word: It is victory! -- victory at all costs, victory in spite of all terror, victory, however long and hard the road may be, for without victory, there is no survival.”*

And a month later in June 1940 he added:

*We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender.*

Words! Words that empowered a generation.

**And then fast forward 20 years to 1963, and a different continent -- our continent**, where a different war is being waged -- though the issue of race is still very much at the center.

In fact, it was right here in Washington that Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. chose to enlist the power of words to prick the conscience of our nation.

- Reminding us that we prided ourselves correctly on the belief of our founding fathers that all people are created equal, the children of one creator
- Reminding us that we were paying insufficient attention (there were insufficient funds in the account!) to the reality that theory and practice were still miles apart.

His words – greatly influenced by the Bible (as, by the way, were President Kennedy’s words two years earlier in his 1961 inaugural address), are still filled with power. Listen:

I have a dream -- that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream (*the dream of the prophet Isaiah in the Bible*) that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh (that’s God’s concern) shall see it together.

This (he said) is our hope. . . .

And while recent news has reminded us that the work of racial healing is obviously and sadly far from over, as Christians, as followers of a creator who made us ALL, and of a savior who died for ALL, **this vision** must remain not only our hope, but a driving force within our lives: within our faith, our work, and our politics, no matter what side of the aisle we’re on! No sphere or area of life must be outside the Lordship of Jesus Christ. As the old saying puts it –“*If Jesus is not Lord of all, he is not Lord at all!*”

One speech. Sixteen hundred and sixty seven words that energized a nation for decades. . .

**SO . . . Words at their best are powerful for good.**

**And we should pray for God to raise up leaders who know how to use them in this way . . .**

And these prayers should be all the more urgent because we also know that the opposite is true as well -- that words not only can build up, and turn the tide, but they have the power to crush and destroy and deceive, and to bring any glimmer of hope to an end . . .

**Sometimes this happens because of empty promises and a sense of deceptiveness:** words flowing off the tip of the tongue which are never, or can never, be fulfilled; words that seem canned and empty. And so cynicism is confirmed and souls are crushed.

**Jesus** warned that our promises should be few and far between and our integrity clear. He told his followers in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:33) that

*Whereas In ancient times it was said, "You shall not swear falsely,  
but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord."*

*what I say to you is this: "Do not swear at all,*

- *either by heaven, for it is the throne of God,*
- *or by the earth, for it is his footstool,*
- *or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King.*

*And do not swear by your head,*

*for you cannot make one hair white or black.*

Remember that Jesus uses "Hebrew hyperbole"! Of course we need to make vows; but the point is about clarity and integrity, so he adds-)

*Just let your word be 'Yes, Yes' or 'No, No'; anything more than this comes from the evil one.*

Careless words and promises that play with the truth can flow fast and furious from the mouths of those in office and seeking office (indeed, from us all!).

**And so too can words that strike at the character and value of others**

**Psychiatrist, Dr. Smiley Blanton**, once told the story of a young man (whose name was Gillespie) who came to see him, crippled by his fears; crippled by his lack of self-esteem; a feeling that he had no value at all.

As Dr. Blanton probed into his life and background, though, he discovered something important, and ultimately liberating, one incident in particular which led to the crippling of this man's life.

Gillespie was fourteen years old at the time. He was at school.

And he really was **no good** at math, but the teacher sadistically enjoyed bringing him up to the front of the class to come up to the board, to try to solve a problem, even though the teacher knew very well that he couldn't do it.

So Gillespie would stand there mortified in front of his friends and in front of the teacher.

And the teacher would say these horrible words in front of everyone, repeatedly: "*If your brains were put in a nutshell and the nutshell were inverted, nothing would fall out.*" And in time those words sank into his brain, where he believed them, so profoundly and subconsciously that whenever he dared to think that he could do something important, the words won! They dragged him back down to a sense of nothingness.

(PLUS, June 1991, pp.16-17)

Words have the amazing power to make America great again. But they also have the power to leave human beings fearful and demoralized. Words like *moron, loser, weak, or stupid*. To which Jesus speaks again clearly in the Same Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 when he says .

<sup>21</sup>“*You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’* <sup>22</sup>*But I say to you that if you are angry with another, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.*”

(Do you know the Greek word for fool here? You may think you don’t, but you do!! It’s *MOROS* . . . from which we get the word, moron! So Jesus says (once again with hyperbole, perhaps – but the point is that it is eternally significant: “*if you say, ‘you moron!’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.*”

### **Our words, says Jesus, are not inconsequential**

- True for our politicians (*for whom, been commanded to pray*)
- And, of course, true for us all . .

In fact, in speaking about the importance of words, and paying attention to our words, Jesus is simply picking up on a major theme in the Bible

which speaks not only of the creative power of God’s Words --

the first book in the Bible begins by telling us that in the beginning creation itself came into being *when God spoke*, and said “*Let there be light!*” (Genesis 1:1-3).

But the Bible also speaks about the power and importance of our words, and the way we use them. Let’s read together the following “words about words” that come from all over the biblical Book of Proverbs:

Death and life are in the power of the tongue, <b>the words we use will reap their consequences.</b>	Pr. 18:21
To make an apt answer is a joy to anyone, <b>and a word in season, how good it is!</b>	Pr. 15:23
A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold <b>in a setting of silver.</b>	Pr. 25:11
Anxiety weighs down the human heart, <b>but a good word cheers it up.</b>	Pr. 12:25
A soft answer turns away wrath, <b>but a harsh word stirs up anger.</b>	Pr. 15:1
A gentle tongue is a tree of life, <b>but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.</b>	Pr. 15:4
The mind of the wise makes their speech judicious, <b>and adds persuasiveness to their lips.</b>	Pr. 16:23
With patience a ruler may be persuaded, <b>and a soft tongue can break what is strong as a bone.</b>	Pr. 25:15
Truthful lips endure forever, <b>but a lying tongue lasts only a moment.</b>	Pr. 12:19
Put away from you crooked speech, <b>and put devious talk far from you.</b>	Pr. 4:24
Death and life are in the power of the tongue, <b>the words we use will reap their consequences</b>	Pr. 18:21

This is serious stuff to God. And it should be to us, too. But even if we know this to be the case, *the ability to put it into practice*, to control our lips in order to speak in the way God wants is rarely easy.

In fact, just as with much of our behavior, our words are so often influenced *by the person standing closest to us . . .* by who we are standing beside; by the crowd or convention we are playing to.

**In his book, entitled “Integrity,”** Yale law professor Stephen Carter, speaks of an occasion when he was a student working as a summer intern for a large New York law firm. (REFERENCE)

There was a day in which all the summer associates were invited at the firm's expense to enjoy themselves at a country club where there was volleyball and tennis and plenty of food.

It was supposed to be a day in which all of them could relax together.

And this, he said, was exactly what they did.

**He was playing in a volleyball game** and the associates were having fun, kidding each other, laughing at their game, *not really keeping score*,  
→when one of the partners joined in. (sr. Partner)

**Carter said that the whole mood began to change.**

Some (with integrity!!) moved out of the game to enjoy something else.

But Carter stayed behind . . . and he says, at that point . . .

“We began to keep score. We began to get upset when people would mess up on what they were doing. We began to listen to the comments of the senior partner. He began to say ‘we should be doing this, we should be doing that,’ *and we became different people because of the pressure that was on us.*”

Christian faith is not only about believing in God and trusting in Jesus to forgive us, and take us to heaven when we die. It’s also about

- Knowing that Jesus is the person/crowd we’re playing to
- Living beside Jesus, constantly;
- Allowing him to live beside and INside us, constantly;
- And allowing his presence and words to influence what we do and what we say for God and good every day

Positive peer pressure . . . until his life, his speech, and **his words** become ours.

In fact, it’s no accident that when the followers of Jesus wanted to describe him to the world, that they *not only* called him Savior and Lord, *but* they also called him (see John 1:1-14) “THE WORD OF GOD.”

His Life in flesh and blood is the greatest speech ever given!

His example is the speech that God wants us to watch!

His words are the speech that God wants us to listen to, more powerful, more life giving *than the speeches of Churchill or King or Lincoln or Kennedy*. And when we draw close to him, and make the choice to listen to *this* Word above all other words, it will penetrate our souls (HE will penetrate our souls) and shape and re-shape our thoughts, our deeds, ***and our words*** . . .

May this be our prayer . . . for ourselves, and our leaders in these tumultuous days.

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**THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016  
[www.NationalPres.org](http://www.NationalPres.org) 202.537.0800