

WORDS AND THE WORD

My dear fellow members and friends of Immanuel:

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Please permit me to say at the outset that I have very much welcomed Pastor Fryer's kind invitation to come out of mothballs, as it were, in order to prepare a sermon for this Reformation Sunday that he will be reading in my stead.

My keen regret, of course, is that I am unable to be here to deliver it in person. Yet I am no less keenly aware that we are ever present to and with one another in the bonds of Christian faith, hope and love: a oneness that transcends the limits of space and time.

I propose to take the cues for my sermon from what is perhaps the most widely used of Martin Luther's many hymns--the one, namely, that we have just sung: "Lord, keep us steadfast in your Word."

Luther's Reformation theology has long been identified as, first and foremost, a "theology of the Word." This circumstance gives us occasion, then, to consider the theme of "words and the Word," of human speech and the speech of God.

Conventional wisdom holds that talk is cheap and that actions speak louder than words. No doubt that is sometimes the case. Our everyday experience bears out that words can easily be used in careless, thoughtless, superficial, and manipulative ways. Moreover, it is no secret that here, in contemporary America, we are at once flooded with information and famished for lack of insight--

overwhelmed, if you will, by empty words. And thus the linguistic coin of the realm becomes debased, cheapened.

Still, we also know from everyday experience that words, when aptly spoken, are not cheap but precious. We then agree with the Book of Proverbs (25:11): "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver." And we know that such good words are not inferior to actions, but are truly deeds in their own right: creative and effective words that have the power to bring an entirely new world into being.

Consider, for example, the following situation. A husband and wife, or a parent and child, or two friends have just spoken bitter and angry words to one another. A pall hangs over the room. Hearts sink. Spirits sag. Resentment wells up in the breast along with feelings of despair. And then, out of the depths, one person quietly says to the other: "I'm sorry. I've wronged you. Please forgive me." Suddenly, in a trice, everything is changed. Hearts leap. Spirits revive. Resentment gives way to reconciliation, hopelessness to hope. The cloud is lifted. The sun shines anew. Words have been spoken, yes, only words--yet powerful enough to transform even the bleakest of situations and, indeed, to change lives.

In truth, is there any one of us whose life has not been touched and transformed, soon or late, by three words in particular, by those matchless words "I love you"? Words, yes, only words--yet none like them to make eyes bright and hearts light and life itself a grand and gladsome thing.

This intrinsic power of language to call new realities into

existence is something that has always been known to poets, to our master wordsmiths. Thus, two generations ago, the Anglo-American poet W. H. Auden could declare: "A sentence uttered makes a world appear / Where all things happen as it says they do." And almost a century and a half ago the New England poet Emily Dickinson could pen this little poem:

A word is dead
When it is said,
Some say.

I say it just
Begins to live
That day.

What the poets have known so well, however, was even better known to the authors of Holy Scripture. For they were ever insistent that there is one Word beyond all others that always does what it declares, that always achieves what it announces: the creative Word, namely, of the Creator God, the Maker of heaven and earth. As the psalmist has testified: "By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth" (Psalm 33:6). God speaks and, behold, it is done: "God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light" (Genesis 1:3). Yes, this God who speaks is the very God who, St. Paul tells us, "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Romans 4:17).

When we turn to consider the theology of Martin Luther, we find that the phrase "Word of God" appears countless times in his voluminous writings. Indeed, his entire public career may be most fittingly viewed as one continuous and concerted effort to make plain what it means for

the people of God to live in, out of, and under the Word of God.

For almost thirty-four years, from October 1512 (when he became Doctor of Sacred Scripture) until his death in February 1546, Luther served as Professor of Bible in the University of Wittenberg, Germany-- appearing in the classroom three or four times weekly to expound the biblical books, devoting primary attention to the Old Testament. During these same years, beginning in 1514, Luther also served as^a pastor and regular preacher in the Wittenberg parish church of St. Mary. It is estimated that he preached, on an average, two or three times weekly, devoting primary attention to the lessons in the Four Gospels. (More than 2,000 of his sermons are still extant.)

While Luther was thus carrying out his dual vocation as professor and pastor, as teacher and preacher, he gradually came to the conclusion that the gravest abuse within the Church of his day was that "God's Word has been silenced." The remedy was plain: "Let everything be done so that the Word may have free course instead of the prattling and rattling that has been the rule up to now. We can spare everything except the Word."

Many Lutheran Christians have long taken it for granted that the phrase "Word of God" refers, chiefly, to the Bible or divinely inspired Scriptures. For Luther himself, however, the Word of God was first and foremost not a book but a person. Recall, for example, the fourth stanza of our entrance hymn, Luther's Ein' feste Burg ("A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"), which plainly declares:

The Word they still shall let remain
Nor any thanks have for it;
He's by our side upon the plain
With His good gifts and spirit.

Yes, the Word of God is none other than our Lord Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, of whom the Gospel of St. John (1:14) declares: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth."

It is to Christ the incarnate Word of God, and to him alone, that the Church's teaching and preaching must ever point, for it is by him, and him alone, that we sinful human beings have been made right with God and even now are being renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit whom he has sent.

But how could we ever come to know and trust in Christ the Word of God apart from hearing him proclaimed to our ears so that he might make his abode in our hearts? The Apostle Paul attests that "faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ" (Romans 10:17). Accordingly, for Martin Luther (and his fellow reformers) the Word of God meant above all the spoken Word: the oral witness to the Word made flesh, the apostolic proclamation of Christ to the world, the gospel or "good news" of Christ as Immanuel--God with us and for us.

Now Luther did not require to be instructed by poets and other wordsmiths that this Word of God, the gospel of Christ, is a creative and effective Word that brings a new world into being, that does what it declares. For it was abundantly clear to Dr. Luther, superb

biblical scholar that he was, that the gospel of Christ is not only the Church's word about Christ but is the living word of Christ himself, that the Lord Jesus is not only the object of the gospel message but is also its acting subject. Thus he himself is the preacher as well as the one preached. After all, in sending out his disciples, Jesus had promised them: "Whoever hears you hears me" (Luke 10:16). Hence Luther could simply and boldly declare: "The gospel of Christ is nothing else than Christ coming to us, or we being brought to him." The gospel of Christ, in short, is nothing less than the real presence of Christ himself.

Yes, Christ is truly present and active here in these audible words of witness to him. Even now, we are beset by trouble and distress and sorrow occasioned by the sickness and suffering of friends and loved ones, by our own illnesses, by the death of persons near and dear to us. And in this very moment our Lord Jesus speaks to us his promising, consoling, ever encouraging word: "Come unto me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:1-3; NRSV).

Even now, we are beset by anxiety and apprehension occasioned^o by an outbreak of the deadly Ebola virus in our homeland. Even now, we have reason to fear the prospect of still more horrendous acts of

terrorism on our own soil as well as abroad. Nor can we easily put out of mind the continuing threat of nuclear holocaust in a world rife with racial and ethnic hatred and with nationalistic fervor. Yet in this very moment our Lord Jesus speaks to us his reassuring, hope-giving word: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid" (John 14:27). "In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer. I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). "And be assured, I am with you always, to the end of time" (Matthew 28:20; NEB).

And even now we remain mindful of our own sin and guilt, of disobedience to our Lord's commands, of lack of trust in his heavenly Father and ours, of lives burdened by past and present acts of selfishness and lovelessness. And in this very moment our Lord Jesus speaks to us his merciful, pardoning, renewing word: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 3:17). Indeed, our Lord Jesus tells us: "Here, at this table, I give you my own body broken and my own blood outpoured for the forgiveness of your sins and the assurance of your salvation."

Our Lord has spoken words, yes, only words--yet we know that they have changed our lives, and the lives of all who have gone before us in the faith, by giving what they promise, by doing what they declare.

On this Reformation Sunday, therefore, we again join our voices in chorus with the voice of Martin Luther of blessed memory, as together we again say and sing: "Lord, keep us steadfast in your Word."

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Reformation Sunday

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