

11 PENTECOST  
JULY 30/31, 2016

FIRST, MARSHALL  
PASTOR SCOTT FULLER

Psalm 97:97-108; Deuteronomy 30:9-14; Luke 10:25-37  
*Your Word Is a Lamp*

*Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

*Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.*

*Words...create worlds. Let me say that again: Words...create worlds.*

That little phrase is a quote from an Old Testament theologian by the name of Rabbi Abraham Heschel, and we'll return to it in a bit. But for the next couple of minutes, I'll ask you to watch a video on the screens and listen to the words of the song that you'll hear. When it's done I'm going to ask you what kind of a **world** those **words** create for **you**.

(Video on this slide)



**What kind of a world do Louis Armstrong's words create for you?**

*Words...create worlds.*

This phrase is certainly true in the bible's creation story. Genesis 1 says: *In the beginning when God created the earth and the heavens... God **said**, Let there be **light**, and there was light.* Then we're told that God goes on to speak words that call into being **water** and **dry land**; **plants** and **birds**; **animals** and, ultimately...voila! – **human beings**.

Each epoch of creation receives God's stamp of approval (it's almost like God stands back, admires his handiwork, nods, gives the thumbs-up and says "This is **good!**"). Interestingly enough, though, it's only when God creates **humanity** that we're given an explanation of *why* such an act might be a good idea.

**27 God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male & female he created them.**

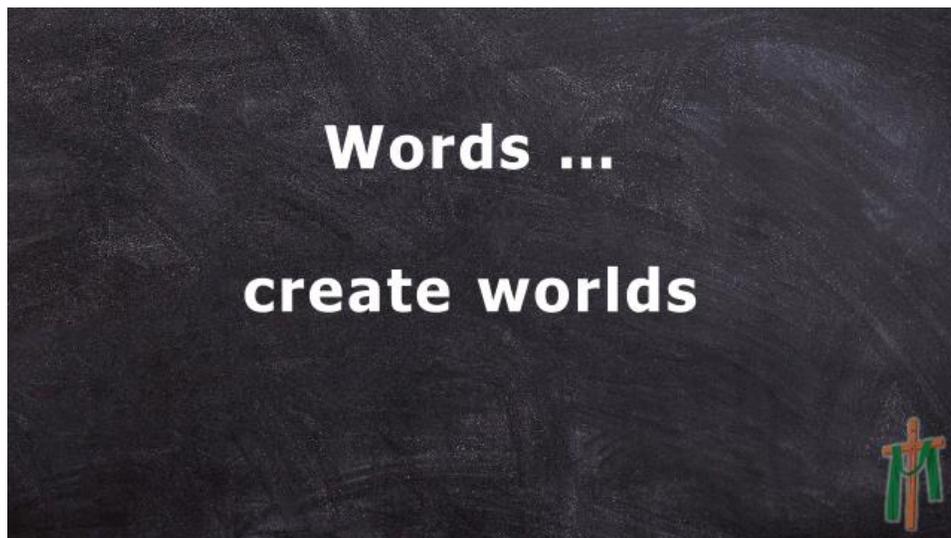
**28 God blessed them, and God said to  
them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill  
the earth and subdue it; and have  
dominion over the fish of the sea and  
over the birds of the air and over every  
living thing that moves upon the earth."**

In short, we human beings are created in the *image* of God  
to speak and act in the *manner* of God  
to care for the earth – and all that is in it – on *behalf* of God.

It is God's expectation, I firmly believe, that since we are created in the image of God, we are daily being asked to let our lives reflect the powers and intention of God in all that we think, do and say.

**So what are some of those powers of God that we humans reflect?**

- Love
- Forgiveness
- Reign/Rule/Stewardship
- What about the ability to create??
  - (children, art, jobs, inventions, stories, accomplishments, etc.)
  - What about creating *worlds* with our *words*...?



Rabbi Heschel, the one who spoke those words, has a daughter, Susannah, who has shared some thoughts about her brilliant father. She said that he often wrote,

*“Words, are themselves sacred, God’s tool for creating the universe, and our tools for bringing holiness — or evil — into the world.”*

She said her father used to remind them that:

*-the Holocaust did not begin with the building of (furnaces), and  
-Hitler did not come to power with tanks and guns;  
it all began with  
-uttering evil words,  
-with (insults),  
-with language and propaganda.*

She continues:

*Words create worlds he used to tell me when I was a child, so they must be used very carefully. Some words, once having been uttered, gain eternity and can never be withdrawn. The Book of Proverbs reminds us, Heschel once wrote, that death and life are in the power of the tongue.”*

-Susannah Heschel, quoting her father Rabbi Abraham Heschel  
<https://lifebetweenthetrees.com/2012/08/06/words-create-worlds-monday-morning-parable/>

This is a brilliant – and frightening! – insight which raises a significant (and significantly unsettling!) question: If Rabbi Heschel is right, if, indeed, ***death and life are in the power of the tongue***, then what are the effects of the words you and I speak on the people around us?

Do our words bring pain to our neighbors, or peace? Do they hurt or do they help? Do they cut, or do they heal?

I remember when the gravitas of this hard truth first came onto my radar (and I'm sad to say the light didn't come on in my little pea brain until after I'd been a pastor for a good, long time!). I was writing a sermon on the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew – that's where Jesus starts teaching his “Blessed R's” – *blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek...*



He then switches gears and employs the method of teaching called *antithesis*. That's where one proposition is set up to be contrasted with another...

...in this case, Jesus states what the **law says**, **intensifies** it, and then calls us to do **MORE** than the law **requires**. You remember his words: *You have heard it said...but I say to you...* and Jesus' command is always harder than the original commandment!

Here's an example of what Jesus says:

*<sup>43</sup> You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' <sup>44</sup> But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> so that you may be children of your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:43-45).*

Dang!!! Love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us?? That just doesn't sit well with our American sense of fair play – does it? Can I get an AMEN???

Well, let's look at a different scenario and see if we can make some sense out of what Jesus wants us to do.

Imagine that you're part of a staff, a team, a club, a neighborhood, a family...(that should cover all of us, right?). A law for maintaining good relationships is that you never participate in conversations that cut down/tear apart/criticize a neighbor behind their back.

For example: you're on the golf course, out for coffee, on your lunch break...somewhere with a couple of your cohorts, and they start saying negative things about third person.

**In that situation, what's the one basic thing you could do to fulfill the letter of that law?**

- Simply refrain from joining them in tearing down the other person

**But, if Jesus' law of love is going to call us to do MORE than the law requires, what would he expect you to do when hearing those co-workers make cutting comments about their neighbor?**

In his explanation of the 8<sup>th</sup> Commandment, Martin Luther writes:  
*We are to fear and love God so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead, we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.*

Here's where this issue became a burr under my saddle. I used to be an impatient driver...ok, I used to be **more** impatient than I am now!?!? But having said that, even then, as now, I never went over the speed limit in town, and rarely over the 5 mph buffer zone on the highway. But, I always wanted to get **up to** the speed limit as **quickly** as possible – AND THEN I WANTED TO **STAY AT THE SPEED LIMIT** – get the picture?

So I'm reading Matthew 5, starting with v. 21 where Jesus says:

**21 "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.'**

**22 But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, 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."**

True confessions: I can't even begin to count the number of times I've used those two terrible words in the context of driving – in fact, the phrase “*You fool!*” is probably the **least** insulting thing I used to think – or say! So on the basis of these two verses of scripture, I have been declared *liable to the hell of fire* over and over and over again.

So here's my question: **What makes those two words so toxic that Jesus would threaten us with damnation if we used them? Why does calling someone a fool incite the Lord to lay out such a heavy penalty? Any ideas???**

Here's a clue to what I've been thinking. **Under which commandment is this sin detailed?** *You shall not **murder**...*

So, essentially, when I call someone a *fool* – even if no one else can hear me – Jesus seems to be saying that I'm guilty of *murdering* them... spiritually? emotionally? relationally?

In addition to that, I know that whenever I call someone a fool, I'm **elevating myself**, right?, and in that way **killing** my neighbor in a **civic** sort of sense. Their life becomes less important to me – in spite of the fact that they could possibly be a friend, an ally, a blessing to all humanity. As it turns out, for the simple fact that they were driving 3 miles **under** the speed limit, I was treating them as if I wished they were dead. That's why it's under the commandment – *you shall not murder*.

*Words...create worlds.*

What kinds of worlds are we creating with the words that we use? This is a critical question for us in this election year, isn't it? Don't worry, I'm not going to tell you how to vote – but I can tell you this: if a candidate were to come forward who refused to bad mouth their opponent, and simply spoke **words** that **created** a world of **hope**, I'd vote for them in a heartbeat...

So let's get back to the bible – where we belong!!



In our Gospel passage for today, Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan. At this point in his ministry, he's very **popular** with the *common* folks and very **unpopular** with the *religious establishment* and those who take themselves too seriously.

An overly earnest religious lawyer tries to trap Jesus with the question: ***What must I do to inherit eternal life?*** Well, Jesus is smart enough to smell a trap, so he answers the man's question with his **own** question saying, *What does the (Bible) say?*

The lawyer answers the question as if it's a little league pitch to a big league homerun hitter: *Love God and love your neighbor*, he replies with confidence.

Jesus says, *Yup – do this and you will live.*

But the lawyer quickly realizes that he's left himself wide-open, and looks to close the door on one terrifying option. So he asks the Lord: ***And who is my neighbor?***

So, I'm asking all of you: Who is ***your*** neighbor?

Are we talking about those who live within 100 feet of the house...those who are devout Christians...those who are hard workers...pet lovers...Twins fans? Or...

Jesus answers the man's question by telling the story of the Good Samaritan...

*A man was beaten by robbers who left him half dead.*

*A priest comes upon him but avoids the victim like the plague.*

*A super-religious person comes along – and does the same thing!*

*Finally, a hated Samaritan finds the guy on the road – and is moved to help. He tends the guy’s wounds, brings him to an inn, pays for his room and care, then promises to pay the innkeeper for any other expenses that are needed to get the guy healthy.*

*Jesus wraps up his story by asking the question: “Which of these three, do you think, was a **neighbor** to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” The lawyer said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”*

Jesus changes the definition of the word **neighbor** for this lawyer – and in doing so creates a new kind of world for him. The man can never go back to the world in which he grew up where only the worthy were fit to be called neighbor...that is a spiritual awakening – for us all, no?

The 12<sup>th</sup> step of the Alcoholics Anonymous program states:

**Having had a spiritual  
awakening as a result of  
these steps, we tried to carry  
this message to alcoholics,  
and to practice these  
principles in all our affairs.**



**For the person in a recovery program like AA, what's the GOAL of carrying this message to other alcoholics???** It's to use their **words** to create new **worlds** of **sobriety**, right???

But we're not just talking about alcoholics. No, over the last 10 weeks we've learned that we can substitute the word "sin" for "alcohol" and "sinner" for "alcoholic" because we're **all addicted to sin** – you, me and everyone else who ever has or ever will take a breath: we are by nature sinful and unclean. So with that in mind, let's re-read the *adjusted* 12<sup>th</sup> step together:

**Having had a spiritual awakening as a result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to other sinners, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.**



It all boils down to one question. If, indeed, words create worlds, then what **worlds** are you and I called to create with our **words**? Think about that for a minute. If every word we speak becomes a catalyst for creating a world, what would that world look like according to the words that you and I have spoken?



Would it be a world of peace, contentment and joy; faith, hope and love?

Or...

Would it be a world of war, envy and anger; distrust, despair, and hate?

If you're like me, a lot of it depends on the moment, on the condition of my soul, the sensation of my psyche, the strength of my heart. At my best moments, I can use words to create worlds of peace in the midst of pain, hope in the darkness of despair, gratitude even in times of loss.

At my worst moments, I can usher in...Armageddon, the final battle between good and evil, with the best (or worst!!) of them.

In this election year, we have been and will continue to be swamped with rhetoric, flooded with information, snowed under with words that will, the political parties are hoping, help create a world in which THEIR candidate is elected, THEIR party is successful, and THEIR platform becomes the bedrock of THEIR vision of a brave, new world...

But this we hold to be self-evident...

-that we can't create a world of faith if we speak words that foster fear;

-that we can't create a world of hope if we speak words that tear our neighbors down;

-that we can't create a world of love if we speak words that reek of hate.

This isn't rocket science, it's not heart surgery, we don't need graduate school brains to figure this stuff out. As our O.T. passage says, we don't need an angel to go up to heaven to bring us God's WORD on some golden tablet – we know this stuff! Says the Lord, *the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe* (Deuteronomy 30:14).

The challenge is **not** in the *knowing*...the **challenge** is in the *doing*... and the *saying*...

So...what does Jesus want you to say to your neighbor?

What worlds will you hope to create with your words?

What message will you carry to other sinners so they'll know that Jesus calls **them** neighbor...and loves them as God's very own?

Amen.