

Text: Proverbs 18:21
Title: The Wisdom of Knowing When (Not) to Speak
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For: Community CRC, Kitchener, ON
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Words are tricky things. And what we mean by the words we say is even trickier.

Like when we run into someone and our words of greeting are “How are you?” And the other person says, “Good. You?” And we automatically say “Good” and either we engage in further conversation or we continue on our way.

We’re not actually asking how the other person is really doing, are we? It’s pleasantries. A polite way of saying hello.

Imagine you’re in the check-out line at the grocery store and you’ve just asked the Sobeys’ employee how they’re doing and then as she beep beeps your discount ground beef and family size box of Honey Nut Cheerios on the scanner, she actually answers the question. She took you at your word and proceeded to share how she is actually doing: how today is hard because her elderly father is ill and she’s the primary care-taker and she’s just exhausted between caring for him and keeping up with her shifts at Sobeys’. Well, that would be real awkward.

Because that’s not what you meant. You may have asked the question, but you aren’t really interested in how this person in front of you is really doing. We don’t actually mean what we’re saying in that moment. It’s a short form of politeness. A way of acknowledging each other. The equivalent of a tip of the hat when people wore hats, more or less.

The next part of this “conversation” isn’t genuine sharing. The proper next part of the exchange is “Do you need bags? Air miles?” And you move on.

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We’ve been tracking with Proverbs now for a few weeks. And we haven’t really dived into the very thing it’s known for: proverbs.

But now we come to the actual proverbs part of the book. Chapters 10-30 are dominated by the kind of two line witty sayings that come to mind when we think about the Book of Proverbs. And throughout this collection of short wise sayings, there are some reoccurring themes:

discipline versus laziness,
wealth and poverty,
faithfulness versus recklessness,
the ills of drinking too much,
there's a whole sub theme about quarrelsome wives and disappointing children.

But no theme is more pronounced than how we speak. And how we don't speak. How we use our words. And to what end we use them.

Over and over again, Proverbs acknowledges that words are tricky things. And what we mean by the words we say is even trickier.

And a lot of the proverbial sayings are the equivalent of "If you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all."

Those who guard their lips preserve their lives
but those who speak rashly will come to ruin.

Those who guard their mouths and their tongues
keep themselves from calamity.

All of which can be boiled down to how one humorist so succinctly summarized:

It's so simple to be wise. Just think of something stupid to say and then don't say it.

And Proverbs isn't original in this line of teaching. Most wisdom literature from ancient cultures - from the Egyptians to the Greeks and Romans and to our own Hebrew literature here - all agree that words are tricky and our speech is full of perils for the wise, and so the sages have generally agreed that silence is better than speech. The wise hold their tongue. Period.

Even fools are thought wise if they keep silent,
and discerning if they hold their tongues.

But our single proverb for this morning reflects a bigger biblical picture of what it means to be a wise person who knows when and when not to speak.

The tongue has the power of life and death,
and those who love it will eat its fruit.

The tongue has the power of life and death. Our words are not only tricky thing but they are deeply powerful. What we say matters. And how we say it matters.

And when it comes to the power of life and death in our words and speech, we are perhaps overly familiar with the power of death.

Whether it's news headlines or articles, online discourse or political speeches, we're exposed to a dizzying array of the way words can be used for death:

fake news and misinformation
denials and misdirection
hyperbole and exaggeration
personal attacks and bullying
gossip and manipulation
and flat out, brazen lies

There's growing alarm that we're in a crisis moment as a culture that we've not only lost the ability to talk together in meaningful ways across differences, but we've also lost a general consensus on what is true. We've retreated into smaller and smaller echo chambers of those we agree with and we've lost the ability to talk to each other without anger or outrage or making the other the enemy.

And this doesn't just play out in news stories or in politics, but it's found among families and friends who no longer talk to each other because of who they voted for or views on vaccinations or the choices made in response to the pandemic.

We are very familiar with the power of death in our words and speech. The way that words can harm and hurt and cut and diminish and abuse and devalue and deface and kill.

But are we as familiar with the power of life in our words? In our speech? In our conversations?

Proverbs is full of imagery and wisdom that points to the way our words can have the power of life.

The tongue of the wise brings healing
The lips of the righteous nourish many
The soothing tongue is a tree of life
A gentle answer turns away wrath
The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life
An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips.
Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.
The words of the wicked lie in wait for blood,
but the speech of the upright rescues them.

This week, as I studied how Proverbs portrays this power of life found in our words, I kept coming back to my friend, Paul.

Paul is a Christian Reformed campus minister out in Calgary. Paul is a super tall guy with a giant grin and has a knack for making people feel at ease in his presence. I first met Paul on the floor of Synod when we were both there a few years ago. Paul knew my husband Brian and came up to tell me how much he loves and appreciates Brian as a colleague and friend. And that endeared me to Paul pretty quickly. Paul is someone who in person is kind and gracious. When he's in conversation with you, he's in it. He listens well. He asks good questions. He's not just waiting for when he gets to speak next. You leave a conversation with Paul feeling like you've been truly heard. He makes a great campus minister.

But my appreciation for Paul has deepened in the last year or so as I've witnessed his online engagement on the Human Sexuality Report.

Now we all know how online discourse can just make us all revert to the worst versions of ourselves. Our words become incendiary. Reductionistic. We provoke and brawl and post controversial stuff just to inflame. And we use the power of our words to toss more garbage onto the giant dumpster fire that is the comment section on any online post. And we delete people we disagree with or fight with them openly. And fall back to our echo chambers of those who agree with us and complain about those who don't.

But Paul resists all that.

I've witnessed him engage in deeply conservative circles and deeply progressive ones. With those who are advocating against the Human Sexuality Report and those who are advocating for it. With those who are in same sex marriages and those who oppose their marriages.

And he does so not to fight or brawl. He comes with good questions. With curiosity. With humility. He manages to be just as kind and gracious online as he is in person. Which I consider a miracle these days.

Paul seeks out those he disagrees with. Not to combat. Not looking for blood. But to understand them better. And I have witnessed him call out those who agrees with when they start to mischaracterize or make the other "side" into an enemy.

Paul's words - both in person and online - bring life. Whether you agree with him or not. Because he uses conversation and his words to build up and not tear down. To strengthen and not destroy. He remains curious and wondering, honest and gracious, and with a courage and humility that he might be wrong and a willingness to listen to those he disagrees with to find out.

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and a gentle answer turns away wrath.

Cal Seerveld, a Reformed philosopher and preacher, writes that

To speak a word is like dropping a stone into a pond. Its vibrant sound keeps on working good or ill like concentric ripples reach to the farthest shore. Words are deeds. Words are things that do something. Speech can visibly strengthen a human like vitamins do the body. Or even kill somebody like poison.

The power of our words comes from being made in the image of God. In the beginning God created the world with words. Speaking our world into existence. Gifting us with language and giving us the power of life and death in the words we speak.

And then knowing how easily we learn the language of death and destruction, God sent the Word made flesh to dwell among us. To teach us again the language of life and grace.

Wisdom comes from learning to speak like Jesus.

Words that bring life rather than death.

Words that built up rather than destroy.
Words that mend rather than tear apart.
Words that are wise rather than foolish.

Words are tricky things. And what we mean with those words can be trickier still. And the wise know how powerful and how dangerous they can be.

May we grow in wisdom - knowing the when to speak and when to hold our tongue.

Whether we're in the grocery store line up, posting a comment online, or discerning the truth of God's Word with brothers and sisters we disagree with, may we understand the power of our words. For good and for ill.

May we, with the Spirit's help and guidance and gentle correction, become fluent in the language of grace that brings life rather than death.

In the name of the Word made flesh.

Amen.