



Westminster Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Dr. Richard Baker -
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Talking Through a Wall: Words as Words

Scripture Lessons: Matthew: 12:33-37 Isaiah 55:10-12

Introductions to Scripture Lessons

It's an understandable conclusion, but mistaken nonetheless, that is, to say that the Bible offers two different Gods, one, the God of the Old Testament, a God of judgment, and two, the God of the New Testament, a God of grace. Understandable because you can draw that conclusion if you focus on only a few famous—and a couple of infamous—passages from each. But mistaken because the conclusion will not survive even a cursory reading of either Testament. It is the same God, Old and New Testament, and grace is promised in both, but judgment is not forgotten.

So today we begin with a New Testament passage, the Gospel of Matthew Chapter 12, that speaks of judgment, specifically with regard to our use of words.

Listen now to God's Word, reading from Matthew chapter 12, verses 33-37 . . .

Our Second Scripture reading, the Old Testament reading, Isaiah chapter 55, verses 10-12, promises grace. God's word will come to us, and fulfill its purpose: our speech will be healed: we, along with all creation, will burst forth into words—into song—praising God. Listen now for God's Word to us . . .

Politics changes the meaning of words.

"Watergate" for example. There was a day—pre-1972—when "Watergate" was nothing more than the name of two apartment complexes, both owned and managed by the same company: one in Washington DC; the other, the smaller one, in Moorestown NJ. (Yes, my hometown: as a child, I swam in the Watergate pool before Watergate was . . . well, Watergate.) But then, in 1972, the Democratic National Committee rented office space at the Watergate in Washington, and then their offices were broken into, and then, soon enough, Watergate became . . . well, Watergate, and the suffix "-gate" came to mean any scandal from travelgate, to gamergate to deflategate (that last being the New England Patriots' alleged deflating of footballs) . . . to, well, you know I could go on and on.

Politics changes the meaning of words. Like the words "that wall," for example, as in "Build that wall!" In the past couple of years, "that wall" has come to mean . . . well, you know what it has come to mean. But for the next few minutes at least, I want you to erase that meaning from your minds. Go back to the day—was it just two years ago?—when a wall was just a wall. I know it's hard, but try. Because today, I want to talk about "that wall," and by "that wall" I don't mean that wall somewhere down there or off in the future, but THAT wall, over there, the prayer wall. And rather than thinking of "that wall" as a way of keeping people out, I want you to think of that wall, the prayer wall, as a medium of communication between us and God, a way that God let's us in.

Simone Weil was a 20th-century, French philosopher, mystic, and political activist, a woman whom the philosopher and playwright Albert Camus called "the only great spirit of our time."

Like other mystics, Weil felt a great, even an infinite, distance between us and God, a distance that could

not be crossed—at least not from our side. Weil wrote: “We cannot take a step toward the heavens. . . . [But] God crosses the universe and comes to us.”

As Weil sees it, God crosses the universe by means of the cross, that is, comes to us in the incarnation and crucifixion of God the son, Jesus Christ. Again, Weil’s words:

Because no other could do it, God himself went the greatest possible distance, the infinite distance. This infinite distance between God the Father and God the Son, this supreme tearing apart, this agony beyond all others, this marvel of love, is the crucifixion.

And yet, even though God has crossed that infinite divide, God has not yet (and won’t until his kingdom finally comes in its fullness) completely obliterated it. It is still there, that distance between God and us—crossed by Jesus on the cross, and therefore crossable—but still there. Hence our communication with God is at one remove, indirect, mediated, if you will.

Weil, says this: “The world is the closed door. It is a barrier. And at the same time it is the way through.” To illustrate this point, Weil, the mistress of the metaphor, makes this one (the quotation I put in the front of your bulletins):

Two prisoners whose cells adjoin communicate with each other by knocking on the wall. The wall is what separates them but is also their means of communication. It is the same with us and God. Every separation is a link.

It is an arresting image: offering up our prayers, we are the prisoner alone, tapping on the wall, near despair, hoping against hope, and then . . . what?! what was that? could it be? Yes, yes, yes the answering taps, words coming back to us, the sudden realization—the overwhelming joy—that we are not alone.

That wall is a barrier, but also the way through. That wall is a separation, but also a link.

Just in case, you haven’t seen it up close: the prayer wall is made of wooden blocks of various shapes and sizes; you write your prayers on slips of paper and slide them between the blocks. At the end of every month, the slips are collected and burned—without being read. If you include the smaller children’s version of the prayer wall downstairs, we averaged 222 slips of paper per month in 2017.

One Westminsterite spoke of what she called the “thin places” between the blocks:

The spaces between the blocks are ‘thin places’ where we can offer what is on our hearts to God without words, without even making a specific request, but knowing that what lies on our heart is being embraced by God. The space between heaven and earth, between my heart and God’s, is closer [here] than anywhere else.

And in case you’re not familiar with the term “thin place,” it comes from Celtic Christianity and goes back a long way: a “thin place” is a place where the distance between heaven and earth is said to collapse, and we’re able to catch a glimpse of the divine. There are thin places all over the world.

The Bangla Sahib, a Sikh temple in New Delhi, the Blue Mosque in Istanbul, the Iona Abbey on the Island of Iona off the western coast of Scotland—all are considered thin places. Jerusalem, since its founding 3000 years ago, has always been a thin place. Thin places are not just sacred places, although they can be those too. Anywhere heaven and earth come close, anywhere we feel the presence of God, anywhere we speak to God and God speaks to us—that place is a thin place. Perhaps (as one writer put it) the whole world is a thin

place—a barrier that is also the way through, a separation that is also a link—and we are just too thick to know it.

Not just the spaces between the blocks then, but that wall itself, is a thin place. And like all thin places, it is beautiful. “The prayer wall,” one member wrote me, “is a beautiful piece of art. I love the overall shape and the different colors and shapes of the wood.” Another wrote, “I love the natural way that it looks and its placement toward the front of the sanctuary.”

But the beauty of that wall, like all beauty, goes deeper than its outward appearance. Beauty is the sensible manifestation of God, the visible sign of the invisible. “Everything beautiful,” Weil wrote, “has a mark of eternity. In everything which gives us the pure authentic feeling of beauty there really is the presence of God—the real presence of God in matter—and contact with the beautiful is a sacrament in the full sense of the word.” So Weil.

But here too, the same back and forth—between distance and communion, between the barrier and the way through, between the separation and the link—is at play. “Distance is the soul of the beautiful,” Weil wrote (that’s the barrier and the separation). But “the beautiful,” she also wrote, “is the experiential proof that the incarnation is possible” (that’s the way through and the link). Beauty, like that wall—like the beauty of that wall—is a medium of communication between us and God.

It’s an old, old story. It was already an old story when the Roman poet, Ovid, told it 2000 years ago, and it’s been retold many, many times since. It’s the story of Pyramus and Thisbee, and it begins like this:

Pyramus, the most handsome of young men, and Thisbee, the most beautiful of young women, grew up in adjoining homes. Proximity allowed them acquaintance and first approaches, then, with time, their love grew. They would have come together in marriage, but their fathers, because of their animosity for each other, forbade it, and forbade them from ever seeing each other again.

There was a wall that had been split by a slender crack, a long time ago, when it was made, common to both houses. That defect was noticed by no one through long ages, but now—what does love not notice?—the lovers noticed it, and made their voices pass through it.

Often, they stood, Thisbe on one side, Pyramus on the other, and in turn inhaled the breath of each other’s words.

Then they would say: ‘O envious wall, why do you block lovers?’

How wonderful it would be if you let us be joined!’

But then they would add: ‘But we are not ungrateful: we confess that we are indebted to you for giving passage to our words.’

Having said such things each night from their separate places, they said good-night and kissed the wall, which kisses which did not reach the other side.

That wall separates them but is also their means of communication. It is the same with us and God. Every separation is a link.

One member wrote this about the prayer wall:

I like its tactile aspect, and the physicality of the the slips of paper—I feel that somehow, because of them, that specific person or concern is “present” in our sanctuary and in the prayer wall.

The member who earlier spoke of thin places, also wrote this:

Often, as I've sat in silence after offering my little slip of paper to the 'thin place' on the prayer wall, my prayer time draws naturally to a close when I hear someone sighing. Sometimes it's my own sigh; sometimes it's someone else sighing. That sigh, too deep for words, signals the presence of God's Spirit praying on my behalf (and on the behalf of the person who sighed) and carrying my prayer beyond that 'thin place.'

With sighs too deep for words—which . . . brings me back to politics.

Politics changes the meaning of words. The dictionary tells us that language is “the means of human communication.” Yeah, right. Have you listened to our political discourse lately? Language is **not** the means of communication. It's the means of obfuscation, evasion, deception, falsehood, amplification and exploitation of ignorance, half-truths, intentional confusion, sowing discord, stirring the pot, kicking up dust, muddying the waters, propaganda, slander, libel, and flat-out lies, and the liking of lies—again, and again and again, thousands and millions of times over.

Words, to use the barbarous neologism of our day, have become “**weaponized**”—they have become tools, weapons, to get us what we want without regard to truth, weapons to hurt and destroy other people, and sometimes to hurt them not even to get something we want, but just because we want to hurt them.

If the quality of our political discourse is a leading indicator of a nation's health, our prognosis as a people is not good. And therein lies the problem. The words we use in our shared life together affect us as a people and as people. Words matter. Jesus says, “I tell you, on the day of judgment, you will have to give account for every careless word you utter.” Words lead the soul. But if the corruption of our words can be both symptom and cause of our corruption, the healing of our words—by God's Words coming to us—can heal us: as in prayer.

In prayer, our words become words again. In prayer, although we should and must ask God for what we want—Jesus tells us to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread,” and that petition represents and invites all other petitions—in prayer, all our words, including our petitions, become words again. That is, they become a means of communication again—communication yes, with God, but also with others and even ourselves (because words are the means by which we both lie and tell the truth to ourselves). In prayer, our words become words again, that is the means of speaking and seeking the truth in love, of sharing our thoughts and feelings, our joys and sorrows, of giving ourselves to others and receiving the selves of others, in short, of sharing a world. The English writer, Charles Williams, one of the Inklings (C.S. Lewis' friend group), says that, in prayer, we experience “coinherence,” that is, we come to indwell in God, in one another, and in the world—as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit indwell—coinhere—in the trinity of God.

In prayer, God's words, God's Word, God, comes to us across the infinite divide. It may be through a wall, but the wall is the way through: every separation is a link. In prayer, we find communion, the sudden realization—the overwhelming joy—that we are not alone. In prayer, we inhale the breath of God's Word. God is with us in prayer—in and through everything, even to the point of death, death on a cross. And so we know, we are promised, that one day, heaven and earth will kiss, and we will see God.

And in the meantime, we pray. So this Lent, I recommend the prayer wall—to you and to myself—as a way of prayer, as a way of talking through a wall with words as words.

Will you pray with me?: Oh God, be with us now: hear our words and make them— make us—yours. Amen.