***Shiloh United Methodist Church***

1 Corinthians 1:10-12, Rev. Tyler Amundson November 15, 2020

12:31, 13:4-8

***Religion and Politics***

These first 4 weeks of November we are exploring how our use of words matter, how God call us to use our words as people of Christ. In the series we are learning that God asks us to use our words to bring grace through the prayerful transmission of words.

Last Sunday we studied how words can form or transform a family, the first week we examined how words build up or tear down. Next week we will wrap up with how and why “The Word” is how we describe of God’s incarnation in the world.

This week, we take on something that seems to either cause us in our country to clam up with no words or to incite our words to rip apart. We are going to be looking at the use of our words in Religion and Politics.

God knows these past few weeks have been full of charged energy around our fate as a country. Perhaps this is either the worst time or exact right time to prepare you to understand how words matter in both these areas of our lives, especially as you prepare for your holiday interactions.

Before we begin I am going to ask that we read from our scripture that is guiding our series. This is written on a card, along with other resources for this series you can download from [www.ShilohBillings.Church/worship](http://www.ShilohBillings.Church/worship). Please join me in reading from Ephesians.

Ephesians 4:29:

Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear.

The question becomes as you repeat these words, do they work in politics or are they, words that build up, not being used anymore?

I think most of us would say, that for some reason it seems we are giving people a pass on using words that build up when it comes to politics. Every other place this is expected, but in political rhetoric it is simply ok to tear down.

I would like to show you an example of these words from a political system outside our own. Please watch –

Clip 1 – British Parliament Speakers - https://vimeo.com/showcase/4026424/video/184379802

(Chuckle)

Makes me wish our politicians in the United States would be more creative, and it also makes our political speech look a lot more tame.

The basis for our government structures pre-dates even Christianity, it goes back to great minds like Aristotle and Plato. These great works that helped people conceive of democracy were in many cases preserved by Christians, and at time Muslims until they got to our founding fathers. In these writings it is clear that these works were meant to inspire us to be lead by the voice of the people.

It was also clear that even in ancient days the people knew how corruptible the human heart was, so systems were suggested that would balance out our own desires with that of the greater good. Good debate over ideas was key to this. People would have to formulate solutions in thesis and through debate we would come to an antithesis of an idea, refining ideas to work for all. No one had the right answers all on their own.

One of our members shared that after this political cycle even the victories feel hollow though. It left me wondering what was missing that was making politics seem like it had destroyed the ability for the words to change it for the better, right here in our own nation.

As I have looked at scripture and studied for today, I have come to three areas that I believe are why it feels our words are failing us in politics today. And to help me with each of these points I have found clips of former Senator John Danforth, an Episcopal Priest who served 3 terms n the United States Senate.

1. Politics work to solve problems when people are willing to listen to each other.

There is a scripture from James that says, “**19**Know this, my dear brothers and sisters: everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to grow angry.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

The truth is Christians, who make something like 80% of the US population are the worst at this. We don’t listen and we tend to let our preconceived notions justify our opinion.

The problem with us not listening is we don’t know what we don’t know. In order for problems to be solved we have to be willing to listen and even consider opposing viewpoints. We have to remember it is a rare day when we get to speak in absolutes or claim absolute victory for being right.

Let’s listen to Senator Danforth: Clip 2 - <https://vimeo.com/showcase/4026424/video/184379992>

I find that one of the virtues of this is actually being willing to read and consider opposing viewpoints. What you actually find surprising, I know I have, when I read a well-reasoned argument I disagree with, is that it often allows me to make my idea more sound or improve upon it.

1. We fail to see our opponents as people. Which when you are in conflict with people, Christ and Paul identify this work as virtuous.

There was a Pew Research Center study that compared statistics from 1994 and 2014 around political views. It shows that in 1994 Republicans and Democratic public officials were more similar in the voting 22 years ago then they were in 2014. Additionally, in the 1994 you would find that 16 % of Democrats and 17% of Republicans viewed their opponents unfavorably. Those numbers more than doubled 20 years later to 38 and 43 percent. Additionally the researches added a new category to reveal that 27% of Democrats and 36% of Republicans now view their opponents as a threat to the national well-being.[[2]](#footnote-2) (Finally, the report tells us something I have heard many people conjecture, but with numbers it demonstrates that people on the right and left rarely change their viewpoints or talk to people whose views differ from their own.)

Adam Hamilton, whose work forms this series for us, says one day he was driving down the road and saw a sign, plastered across a tractor trailer, saying, “Are you a producer or a parasite?” Then below it said that one political party was a party of parasites. Then he asked, “What did this sign maker hope to accomplish?” Do they think anyone pulled over and said, “Hallelulah, I have seen the light.” And then changed parties? “No!” he says, this was meant to affirm one group and poke others in the eye. Our words matter, and if we believe in words that might bring us together we need to believe in the common good being a virtue to speak for in our political rhetoric.

Let’s hear from Senator Danforth once more – Clip 3 - <https://vimeo.com/showcase/4026424/video/184379806>

We need to tell stories of one another that are true, call out injustice not of a group, but of individual actions that we see as leading to injustice. And we need to hold us all accountable to speaking the truth, and posting the truth.

In fact the best way I think we can stop appealing to self-interest is to fact check those we agree with. There are websites on both sides of issues and we seem to only fact check our opponents. Take some time and fact check your favorite candidates in the future, and contact them and ask for their honesty.

During the US civil war Abraham Lincoln met with a group of ministers for a prayer breakfast. Lincoln was not a church-goer but was a man of deep, if at times unorthodox, faith. At one point one of the ministers said, “Mr President, let us pray that God is on our side”. Lincoln’s response showed far greater insight, “No, gentlemen, let us pray that we are on God’s side.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

We might find in the process we are as human as our opponent and practice some of that great commandment, Jesus points us to.

1. We need to believe in the Christian practice of reconciliation.

Here is Senator Danforth – Clip 4 <https://vimeo.com/showcase/4026424/video/184379806>

It has become radical for churches to speak of embracing people from both sides of the aisle of politics. Yet, Senator Danforth, a lifelong Republican, states here that he sees religion as being one of the few places to make that happen. What if our churches truly could become these places?

In his second inaugural address, which was shorter than my sermon, Abraham Lincoln addressed the “peculiar institution of slavery” and how it drove us apart through compromise that did not go far enough. And in the same short message he shared these words,

With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Today you have heard the words of Paul from Corinthians read for our scripture. It is Paul’s work that primarily calls us to reconcile our differences and come together for God’s common work.

1 Corinthians 1:10-12 (CEB)

Now I encourage you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ: Agree with each other and don't be divided into rival groups. Instead, be restored with the same mind and the same purpose.  My brothers and sisters, Chloe's people gave me some information about you, that you're fighting with each other.  What I mean is this: that each one of you says, "I belong to Paul," "I belong to Apollos," "I belong to Cephas," "I belong to Christ."

Who do you belong to? Paul was challenging us and the people of his day, to be sure we know who we ultimately belong to. That God is the final act in the show and Christ has come to pull us together for that time.

1 Corinthians 12:31(CEB)

Use your ambition to try to get the greater gifts. And I'm going to show you an even better way.

The greater gifts are not being more wealthy, having the right things, or even being right. Paul is calling us to the way of reconciliation and connection. And then finally he ends with these words, that were not just designed for good wedding words.

1 Corinthians 13:4-8(CEB)

Love is patient, love is kind, it isn't jealous, it doesn't brag, it isn't arrogant, it isn't rude, it doesn't seek its own advantage, it isn't irritable, it doesn't keep a record of complaints, it isn't happy with injustice, but it is happy with the truth. Love puts up with all things, trusts in all things, hopes for all things, endures all things. Love never fails. As for prophecies, they will be brought to an end. As for tongues, they will stop. As for knowledge, it will be brought to an end.

How will you use your words to let your faith shape your politics? I leave you with my favorite story, a parable from the time of the American Civil War.

Old Joe lived way out in the countryside, and he had one good neighbor. They’d been friends all their lives. And now that their spouses were buried and their children raised, all they had left were their farms… and each other.

But for the first time, they’d had an argument. It was over a stray calf that neither one really needed. It seemed as though the calf was found on Joe’s neighbor’s land and so he claimed it as his own. But Old Joe said, “No, that calf has the same markings as my favorite cow, and I recognize it as being mine.”

Well, they were both a bit stubborn, so they just stopped talking to each other. That happened about a week before, and it seemed that a dark cloud had settled over Old Joe…until there came a knock at his door.

He wasn’t expecting anybody that morning, and as he opened the door, he saw a young man who had a box of tools on his shoulder. He had a kind voice and dark, deep eyes, and he said, “I’m a carpenter, and I’m looking for a bit of work. Maybe you’d have some small jobs that I can help with.”

Old Joe brought him into the kitchen and sat him down and gave him some stew that he had on the back of the stove. There was some homemade bread, some fresh churned butter and homemade jam.

While they were eating and talking, Joe decided that he liked this young fellow, and he said, “I do have a job for you. Look right there through my kitchen window. See that farm over there? That’s my neighbor’s place. And you see that crick [creek] running right down there between our property lines? That crick, it wasn’t there last week. My neighbor did that to spite me. He took his plow up there, and he dug a big old furrow from the upper pond and flooded it.

“Well, I want you to do one better. Since he wants us divided that way, you go out there and build me a fence – a big, tall fence – so I won’t even have to see his place no more!”

And the carpenter said, “Well, if you have the lumber and the nails, I got my tools, and I’ll be able to do a job that you’ll like.”

Joe had to go to town to get some supplies, so he hitched up the wagon and showed the carpenter where everything was in the barn. And that carpenter carried everything he needed down to the crick and started to work.

And his work went smooth and fast. He did his measuring and his sawing and his nailing. It was about sunset when Old Joe returned, and the carpenter had finished his work. When Old Joe pulled up in that wagon, his eyes opened wide and his mouth fell open…because there wasn’t a fence there at all.

It was a bridge, going from one side of the crick to the other! It had hand rails and all – a fine piece of work – and his neighbor was just starting to cross the bridge with his hand stuck out, and he was saying, “Joe, you’re quite a fellow to build this bridge. I’da never been able to do that, I’m so glad we’re going to be friends again!”

And Joe, he put his arms around his neighbor and said, “Oh, that calf is yours. I’ve known it all the time. I just want to be your friend, too.”

About that time, the carpenter started pulling his tools into the box and then hoisted it onto his shoulder and started to walk away. And Joe said, “Wait, come on back, young fellow. I want you to stay on. I got lots of projects for you.”

The carpenter just smiled and said, “I’d like to stay on, Joe, but you see, I can’t. I got more bridges to build.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Shalom and Peace to you bridgebuilders.

1. https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=James%201%3A19&version=CEB [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.people-press.org/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://storiesforpreaching.com/whose-side-is-god-on/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres32.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. https://winningtales.wordpress.com/2013/01/03/old-joe-and-the-carpenter-a-tale-from-appalachia/ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)