



Massanutten
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Way of the Wise (Proverbs Series)
Speaking (and Hearing) Words of Wisdom
A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

August 16, 2009
20th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year B)
Proverbs 12, 13, 15, and 16 (selected verses)

Proverbs 12, 13, 15 and 16 (*selected verses*)

- 12:18—Rash words are like sword thrusts,
but the tongue of the wise brings healing.*
- 13:3—Those who guard their mouths preserve their lives;
those who open wide their lips come to ruin.*
- 15:1—A soft answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger.*
- 15:2—The tongue of the wise dispenses knowledge,
but the mouths of fools pour out folly.*
- 15:4—A gentle tongue is a tree of life,
but perverseness in it breaks the spirit.*
- 15:7—The lips of the wise spread knowledge;
not so the minds of fools.*
- 15:12—Scoffers do not like to be rebuked,
they will not go to the wise.*
- 15:18—Those who are hot-tempered stir up strife,
but those who are slow to anger calm contention.*
- 16:24—Pleasant words are like a honeycomb,
sweetness to the soul and health to the body.*

I learned a lot about words and their power this week. The other morning, Sarah, our six-year-old, said something at the breakfast table that sent chills down my spine. She and I were alone at the table, and she had just come down from Rachel's room, where she had been to check on the newest member of our household—Cuddles, the hamster.

I had barely started sipping from my first cup of coffee when Sarah announced with obvious delight: "I figured out how to open Cuddles' cage."

Just a simple sentence—a few words strung together—but those words had such power that I was instantly transformed from a gentle, coffee-sipping father delighting in conversation with his daughter into a person overcome by fear at the prospects of how far Cuddles could have run in the moments since Sarah made her discovery. He was safe in his cage, as it turns out, but those simple words that Sarah had spoken reminded me of something we all know well. Our words have power, and, if we're going to open our mouths to speak, we should do so carefully.

What you say and how you say it—or even whether you say it—are subjects that consume the book of Proverbs. In fact, speaking or hearing or silence is mentioned in

every chapter of the book. It's clear that the use of language is important to the sages. If we want to be wise—to live faithfully and well—there is simply no doubt that we have to watch the way we speak. And, the sages remind us, the way we listen is just as important to living wisely as what we say.

I long ago made peace with God's sense of humor, but God still manages to make me smile in amazement sometimes. As I said, I learned a lot about words and their power this week.

Early this week I found myself in one of those moments that God must have looked on with a sense of irony. It was so early this week that I hadn't even started to think much about the sermon yet, though I knew the scripture and theme, of course. But I found myself doing exactly the opposite of everything that I hope to do as a person of faith seeking to walk in the way of wisdom.

Here's the second half of one of the proverbs we read a moment ago: "the mouths of fools pour out folly." If that's true, then I was a huge fool one day this week.

I won't go into the details, but suffice it to say that I had the opportunity to turn away wrath with a soft answer. I had the opportunity to guard my mouth and to spread knowledge and to use my speech to bring healing. Those are things the sages hold up for us as proverbial wisdom, but I did the exact opposite.

I spoke rash words, and for all the world they looked like sword thrusts seeking someone to pierce. I vented harsh words that I hoped would provoke anger. I poured out folly that was born of a hot-tempered reaction that did nothing to bring healing but only brought strife.

Even as it was happening, I found myself thinking of better responses—more helpful words—healing words, but for whatever reason—no matter the justifications—I didn't speak them. I suspect that you have had moments exactly like that.

Maybe you found yourself arguing with your child about something and heard yourself speaking words that shocked your ears and that hit the child you love with a brutal and devastating force.

Perhaps you remember the word you spoke across the table to your spouse that you knew would hit them in the very place that would hurt the most.

Or perhaps you're thinking of the words you spoke that weren't so bad—they may have even been true—but you knew deep down, or not even so deep—that you weren't speaking them in the right place or to the right person.

It doesn't take much to dredge up memories of words that we have spoken to others or that others have spoken to us. Those words live inside us, and every now and then something happens in our lives, and it's as if someone has pushed the "play" button and we hear the long-forgotten recording of some words that we have heard or spoken, and it's as if we're hearing them for the first time. And those words do their work again, whether for healing or for strife.

Several years ago I wrote a letter to thank one of my professors for what she had meant to me in seminary. In that letter, I told her that I continue to hear her voice as I prepare sermons, and that I had learned so much from her as a person of faith. I was simply writing to say thanks, and that she continued to be a person of influence in my life.

Her response to that letter surprised me, but I have found there is much wisdom in what she wrote. In her return letter, she mentioned that she was putting my letter in a file with several others that she had received over the years. She had a name for the file, but I've forgotten it. She wrote that when she experiences a difficult time and starts to hear voices that cause her to question her worth as a person, she grabs a letter from that file and re-reads it as a way of bringing healing into her life.

While part of me delights in knowing that someone keeps my words close when healing is needed, it also makes me painfully aware that others surely keep some of my words "on file" in their life that do the exact opposite. Even if they were words rashly spoken in the heat of the moment, their force can be felt for years, and there's nothing quite so painful as someone reminding you of what you had once said to them that continues to hurt them every time they remember it.

In his wonderful book about learning to speak the language of our faith, Tom Long describes that at the end of each day, all of us can look back at our words and recognize that not all of our speech has been wise, true, or kind. He then tells of a conversation with his now-adult daughter about her experiences growing up. Here's how he tells it: "My daughter is a bright and strong woman, the mother of two children, and we were talking about how, as a parent, she sees now in her children many of the struggles, fears, accomplishments, and joy she remembers from her own childhood. The conversation was good and it was honest, and at one point my daughter remembered an argument we had when she was a teenager. What it was we were arguing about we have both long forgotten, but my daughter vividly remembers one moment of this dispute. Evidently we were exchanging sharp words, father and daughter locked in battle, and I threw up my hands in frustration and said, 'You're nothing but trouble to me!'

"It was a stupid thing to say. It's the kind of thing people say to each other, even people who love each other, in the heat of an argument, but it was a dumb thing to say nevertheless. And it wasn't true, either. Like most parents, I cherish my children deeply, and my daughter and my son are the apples of my eye, my treasures, and a great joy to me. It was simply never even remotely true that she was nothing but trouble to me. I have never once really thought that, and, in fact, I don't remember saying it.

"But she does. It was years, she said, before she could think about that moment without pain. For me, my words were just hurled into the heated atmosphere, soon to evaporate, but for her, those words, hastily spoken, were shaped like poison darts, and they found their target in her heart" (Thomas G. Long, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, 144-145).

The sages knew this danger. And so all throughout the book of Proverbs, we are reminded over and over and over again, "Watch what you say, and be careful how you say it. And sometimes, you shouldn't say anything at all."

Here's the truth, though. Our culture is doing its best to drown out the call for restraint and gentleness in our speech to one another. We have turned conversation into a battle to be won, each side insisting that they alone have the truth, and you have to keep yelling all the louder lest someone else's thoughts gain traction.

We could have quite a debate, I'm sure, about healthcare reform in our nation, but

aside from what you may think about it, the public forums reveal another crisis which afflicts our nation. The “conversation” at those forums—at least many of them—reveals the total absence of any real ability to speak to one another in ways that build community and promote healing and peace.

And, as painful as it may be, the same could be said for the conversations which take place on smaller stages—like around our tables at home, or this table here, or in the office across town. We are simply neck-deep in a river of words hastily spoken or summarily dismissed, and it doesn’t take long to see why so many live with broken spirits and are in need of healing words.

What you say matters. And how you say it matters too. So where do you learn to speak and listen wisely and well in a world that teaches differently? Let me suggest three ways or places where we can learn to speak wisely and well.

First, get to this sanctuary. Listen to the language of the prayers and the readings from scriptures and the hymns we sing and the affirmations we offer. They stretch us beyond ourselves and give us words to use in our speech and lives—words like grace and peace and justice and hope and life.

Second, simply practice the simple art of conversation. My friend Chris tells about his wife making the suggestion at the dinner table one night that she wanted each of them to talk about their high and low of their day. As Chris tells it, his groan was the loudest at the table.

But as they did just that at the table each night, something began to happen. In their simple speaking and listening, those common meals became sacred spaces for them and they grew closer in words spoken and heard.

So let me suggest that you eat more more together at home and at church. I’m particularly excited that this year’s Wednesday night program is for the whole church family. As we sit together at the common table, the risen Christ will be made known as we break bread in his name, and our life together will be transformed.

And third, the best thing we can do to speak words that bring healing and life is to be careful. I know that’s an awfully simple thing on paper, but there is something about being intentional in our actions that can shape us. The question is, how can I in my own life model healthy conversation?

As I mentioned, I blew that earlier this week. But I did have the chance to speak more words later, which I did. I spoke words asking for forgiveness, and forgiveness was given.

But what can we do to be more careful about our speech in the first place? Perhaps we should bind these words from the sages to our doorways as we walk out the door: “the tongue of the wise brings healing.”

“A soft answer turns away wrath.”

“The tongue of the wise dispenses knowledge.”

“Pleasant words are like a honeycomb,
sweetness to the soul and health to the body.”

If we want to be wise, these are the things we will remember before we open our mouths to speak.