



Words Matter

Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda, secundum verbum Dei

Theological Conversations – PCUSA

Mary Beth Anton

In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

—John 1:1 (NRSV)

The Word became flesh and blood,
and moved into the neighborhood.
We saw the glory with our own eyes,
the one-of-a-kind glory,
like Father, like Son,
Generous inside and out,
true from start to finish.

—John 1:14 (*The Message*)

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.

—Colossians 3:16a (NRSV)

Let the Word of Christ—the Message—have the run of the house.

Give it plenty of room in your lives.

—Colossians 3:16a (*The Message*)

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,

O LORD, my rock and my redeemer.

—Psalm 19:14 (NRSV)

Words matter.

Recently a friend came to my house with her daughter and three grandchildren to celebrate her birthday over a cup of tea and a plate of cookies. Her youngest grandchild, Chase, is three years old. For the first years of his life, Chase wisely elected to allow his twin sisters to do all the talking. On his grandmother's birthday, however, he suddenly gave voice to several decided opinions:

I LOVE cookies.

I LOVE puzzles.

I LOVE PJ Masks.

I LOVE my mom.

Almost every sentence out of Chase's mouth included the word *LOVE* expressed with feeling and passion. His mother laughingly told me that apparently, Chase *LOVES* everything and everyone. *Love* is his favorite word.

I laughed with my friend, but later reflected on Chase's use of the word, *love*. I am over 50 and supposedly well-educated; but like Chase, I tend to sprinkle my conversation with the word *LOVE*. Following Chase's lead, I also imbue the word with deep feeling: I *LOVE* chocolate. I *LOVE* coffee. I *LOVE* Benedict Cumberbatch. I *LOVE* this; I *LOVE* that. I *LOVE* my husband and children. Used so promiscuously and indiscriminately, my chosen verb has grown blurred over the years, until I find myself equating objects of affection regardless of their relative merits. Do I truly love pizza with the same feeling as my family?

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We live in an era of continuously available information and news. Words bombard us from every direction, via social media, radio, television, newspapers, the Internet, and all the other sources we feel so compelled to consult throughout the day. Words appear in all shapes and sizes. Words arrive from every direction and at every decibel level of sound. Some words cause a smile to cross my face. Others make me laugh out loud. But other words hit my ears like a blow to the stomach. Some are true. Some are blatantly false.

Language and words have taken a particularly brutal beating over the last two years. Every election cycle in any democracy worth its salt presents challenges, but the most recent one drained many of us into exhaustion. By the time November 8, 2016 arrived, I was numb from the daily verbal assaults from all sides, with the quality and character of our national discourse having descended to the lowest possible levels. All sides of the electorate used ugly words to create drama and incite outrage.

When I heard that Hillary Clinton used the word "deplorables" to describe what turned out to be a significant part of the electorate, my heart sank.¹ While words and actions may indeed be deplorable, people are not, particularly for those of us who root our world view in the truth that *God so loved the world*.

1. See <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/11/us/politics/hillary-clinton-basket-of-deplorables.html>

In a similar vein, Donald Trump’s refrain to “lock her up” echoed and evoked cultures in which the winning side jails its political opponents once the votes are in.² And then his invocation of “rigged,” repeatedly called our voting system into question with impunity.³

What truth is found in these words, spoken to the lowest, most visceral levels of our souls? Many of those more engaged in the process than I was tried to assure me that their side did not mean what they said, that I should not take the words seriously. But, to me, *words matter*.

If you are active on Facebook, then I need give no examples of how some use language to degrade, humiliate, and insult. When I was young, my parents gave me a small, plastic creature with wild green hair. *Trolls* were the toys of the moment, and all of my friends had at least one. Now a *troll* is one who types and posts vile, ugly words with seemingly no care to the damage they cause. The cloak of invisibility provided by the World Wide Web empowers anonymous individuals to abuse and degrade all those with whom they disagree, and enables judgments to be passed down from faceless adversaries on high.

While others do not descend to the level of trolls, their efforts to maintain a level of somewhat civil discourse can quickly degenerate to lower levels of speech or escalate to higher levels of sound. Despite my belief in the inherent value of free speech in any democracy, I find myself troubled. Again, words matter.

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I live in West Texas. For over 27 years, I have had the privilege of serving as a pastor in a town of 120,000—a town I have learned to appreciate, love, and call home. More times than I can count, a family member or a friend of a deceased loved one has said to me: “His *word* was his bond. His handshake sealed the deal.” In the rough-and-ready world of the oil patch, one’s verbal commitment overshadows the nuances of contracts. For people of integrity, their words are enough. Nothing more is required. Actions reflect the spoken word.

In my community, there are still many of all ages for whom the phrase, “their *word* is their bond,” is still accurate. I suspect this may be true in many local communities. Nationally, I am not so confident. We have become sloppy and contentious in the use of language. We speak without thinking or use words for dramatic effect rather than for accuracy and truth. For some, these circumstances are simply the byproducts of unlimited discourse. But for others of us, *words matter*.

If the current standards of speech are dangerous for our society, they are utterly disastrous for the church. Words are critical to the faithful. Words convict us and call us to account. Words help us face the truth about ourselves, and our need for the Savior. Words have the power to impart God’s message of love, grace, mercy, salvation, and hope. If words fail us, how can the Gospel be fully expressed, heard, and received? *Words matter* inside the church and in the way that we seek to engage the world.

If *words matter*, what way is open to us, the followers of Christ and heirs of the Reformation?

2. See Trump’s tweets on October 15, 2016 and November 27, 2016 as reported in the following articles: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/11/22/a-brief-history-of-the-lock-her-up-chant-as-it-looks-like-trump-might-not-even-try/?utm_term=.64b85d5878ee; and <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/23/us/politics/donald-trump-congress-democrats.html>
3. See Trump’s tweets as reported in the following article: <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/2016-in-tweets-from-donald-trump/article/2610574>

During the summer of 2016, my habit was to walk early in the morning, before the heat of the day. While I walked, I listened to the news or political podcasts on my iPhone. As the summer progressed, what I heard increasingly discouraged and depressed me. One day, I decided that I had heard enough from the politicians and the pundits. Instead of the news, I began to listen to sermons on my daily route.

Day after day, I listened to words preached by friends and colleagues, and sermons prepared by others whose words resonated with me. Step by step, their words nourished my parched and weary soul; they encouraged, convicted, and challenged me. Given my chosen profession, I should not have been surprised that the words of sermons moved me to prayer, but they did, and I was. The words and my prayers convicted me of my own, poor, verbal habits. I began to pay attention to my conversations, my posts, my texts, and my critiques of the words of others. Ultimately, they compelled me to seek different paths toward loving my neighbors, even those that I had not bothered to notice, or, much worse, chose to avoid.

The more I listened, the more I thought about why I value words and their use. I took down a favorite book from my shelf, Kathleen Norris's *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith*. In the opening pages, she writes of the power of language:

Language used truly, not mere talk, neither propaganda, nor chatter, has real power. Its words are allowed to be themselves, to bless or curse, wound or heal. They have the power of a "word made flesh," of ordinary speech that suddenly takes hold, causing listeners to pay close attention, and even to release bodily sighs—whether of recognition, delight, grief, or distress.⁴

Thinking about Norris's work, the familiar words of the first chapter of John's Gospel flooded my mind and heart:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1, NRSV) . . . The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, . . . generous inside and out, true from start to finish. (John 1:14, *The Message*)

What difference does this Word make for us and in our lives? The Word became flesh and blood and moves into our neighborhoods, into our homes, into our lives, *among us*. The Word made flesh, Jesus, our foundation and cornerstone is present. The Word of God Incarnate dwells among us. This Word is generous. This Word is true. This Word informs, shapes, directs, and guides our living, our action, and our speech, if we will but give it room. While I have been aware of this text throughout my faith journey, it resonates even more for me today. It is Theology 101 for those of us who call the church home.

We also know that we learn of this Incarnate Word, Jesus, in Scripture—the Word of God written. In Scripture, we discover the God who creates, redeems, and sustains us by God's Word. As little children we learn: "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so." How would we know this in our deepest places without the Word both Incarnate and written? *Words matter*.

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4. Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 9.

The Reformers stood firmly on the centrality of the Word. Believing that an understanding of Scripture was essential to God’s people, the early Reformers worked to translate the Bible into the vernacular. The Reformers understood that the Word of God is best received by listening to the Word read, studied, and proclaimed in one’s native tongue.

As a child growing up in a German branch of American Lutheranism, I clearly remember hearing the story of Martin Luther every October during our Reformation celebrations. We learned of his 95 Theses being hammered on the door of the Wittenberg Church. I was not particularly clear about what exactly was meant by “theses,” but I knew that there were 95. Likewise, the *Three Solas* were drilled into our heads: *sola fide, sola gratia, sola scriptura* (faith alone, grace alone, Scripture alone). I particularly enjoyed the stories about Luther’s outrage at the selling of indulgences. We learned that Luther’s translation of the Bible into everyday German—from the original source languages of Greek and Hebrew—paved the way for *us* to read God’s Word in our own language.

By the time I was a child, only the oldest members of our congregation could read the Scriptures in German. The only German most of us knew were the odd phrases that were a part of our family’s vocabulary or the Christmas carols we learned in German in Sunday School: *Stille Nacht* and *Ihr Kinderlein, Kommet*—*Silent Night* and *O Come, Little Children*. We were given Bibles in contemporary English. I was given a copy of *Good News for Modern Man* as an elementary school church camper. For my Confirmation, I received a copy of *The Living Bible*. Putting the Word of God into accessible language is still essential for the church. Our congregation has financially supported the Wycliffe Bible Translators, and the practice of reformers like Martin Luther must still be ours today. *Words matter.*

In his preface to *The Message*, Eugene Peterson writes of the advent of his translation:

I didn’t start out as a pastor. I began my vocational life as a teacher and for several years taught the biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek in a theological seminary. . . . But then life took a sudden vocational turn to pastoring in a congregation. I was now plunged into quite a different world. The first noticeable difference was that nobody seemed to care much about the Bible, which so recently people had been paying me to teach them.

. . . Very few were interested in what I considered my primary work, getting the words of the Bible into their heads and hearts, getting the message lived.⁵

If words matter, then “getting the words of the Bible into our heads and hearts, getting the message lived” is our calling as a Church. Adhering to the centrality and power of the Word of God is what *reformation* is all about. In each generation, men and women who seek to follow the living Christ must struggle anew with what fidelity to the Word means, what it looks like in practice. In order to live out the Word *in our neighborhoods*, we must be constantly engaged in the study of Scripture, in prayer, and in worship. The Word then lives among us, in us, and works through us by the power of the Holy Spirit. How do we as a church in the twenty-first century make the Word our priority as they did in the sixteenth century?

“Let the Word of Christ—the Message—have the run of the house” (Colossians 3:16a). What might it look like if *the Message* is humbly lived out in us with the help of the Holy Spirit? Might

5. Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 7.

our speech be shaped and marked by the Word—might our very lives? Might the words we speak to one another in relationship—words between spouses, between parents and children, between neighbors and strangers, between enemies, and between friends—be grounded in the Word? How might the words we post, the messages we text and tweet, the words we whisper, and the words we shout reflect the Word made flesh? And if our words did reflect the Word, might they ring clear and true above a sea of noisy gongs and clanging symbols? *Words matter.*

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Once our children were in college and living far from home text messaging became an easy way for us to communicate as a family. I quickly adopted the style of our children:

“hey! what r u up to OR whatcha doin”

I rarely address my children or sign off with the traditional “Love, Mom.” My husband, a student of British literature, has found himself unable to follow my lead. He texts as he speaks, in complete sentences, with correct grammar and syntax, greeting the recipient by name and signing off affectionately with his. My husband’s text messages reflect his respect for and love of the English language and its literature. To him, *words matter.*

More significant from my perspective is that our children respond to him in kind. While they answer me in the same way in which they communicate with their peers, with slang, incomplete phrases, little to no punctuation, and *emoji*, they respond to my husband in his voice, using complete sentences and commas. They use vocabulary that I was unaware is part of their lexicon. Their grammar, syntax, and punctuation are always correct. They conclude with words of love and spell out their names. Our children follow their dad’s lead, his example. And in the process, they continue to learn what he has consistently modeled for them their entire lives: *words matter.*

How do we speak and model the active Word in our lives for our children, for our community, and for our world? How might our active engagement with and commitment to the living Word influence our surroundings for good? What if the Church would actively move into the neighborhood with Jesus, modeling his message in our speech and way of life? *Words matter.*

At a recent session meeting, a ruling elder offered an evening devotion. Denny has been a member of the congregation since he was 12. He is one of the older members currently serving on the session. Denny unfolded a piece of lined paper and began to read carefully the words he had written in advance of our meeting. He told us that prayer is sometimes hard for him. He shared that when their pastor’s wife had been diagnosed with cancer some years earlier, he had prayed diligently for her healing. He was devastated when she died in spite of his prayers.

Then Denny directed us to the Lord’s Prayer. He said that its form and content had helped him in his prayer life. He walked us through each petition. Denny’s carefully chosen words, delivered with grace and humility, set the tone for our meeting and conversation. It was clear to me that the Word worked through Denny’s words to unite us in common faith and purpose.

After the meeting I thanked Denny for his devotion and told him what it meant to me. He apologized for writing it down and reading from a paper rather than delivering it spontaneously. As I drove home, I was reminded of the power of words and how the Holy Spirit uses them among us. On the following Sunday morning, I arrived to find Denny already in the sanctuary practicing his guitar. As the time for worship drew near, a group of young people ran to join him. They were kids from the neighborhood.

In the years Denny has been a member, the neighborhood around his church has changed. The demographics of the church no longer reflect their neighborhood, but they are finding ways to humbly follow where Jesus leads. Every week, a van from the church goes out and picks up a load of children and youth for Sunday school and worship. This summer, they will make sure that all of the kids get to a week of camp. At Christmas time, they offer a breakfast with Santa, and families from the neighborhood pour in to greet Santa and share a meal. Denny and his church family are working to put their words into action reflecting the Word. *Words matter.*

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Late in the summer of 2017, my husband and I traveled to London to celebrate his 60th birthday. One evening, we went to a concert by candlelight at the church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields. When the church was originally constructed, it stood outside the city limits, literally located in the fields beyond the sounds and sights of the city. Over time, the city enveloped the church, and it now stands on the edge of busy Trafalgar Square. The parish of St. Martin-in-the-Fields sees the city as its mission field, where they seek to follow the Word into the world. The night we visited the church, the square teemed with people from all walks of life, with loud music and drums emanating from musicians as spotlights were playing across the sky.

Ascending the steps to the portico, every visitor passes a tall, circular, stone column. Seen from the base of the stairs, the column appears to be a large block of half-finished concrete. Reaching the top, one discovers that the figure of an infant boy is emerging from the surface of the stone. The baby is a newborn, his umbilical cord still attached. Inscribed around the edge of the sculpture are the words: *“IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD AND THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND LIVED AMONG US.”*⁶ Because of the Word made flesh, *words matter.*

6. To view a photo of the sculpture, “Christ Child,” by the artist, Mike Chapman, visit the artist’s website at: http://www.mikechapmansculptor.com/photo_6382992.html#photos_id=6382992

Words Matter

Conversation starters: Discussion Questions

Michelle Bartel

1. Find John 1:1, John 1:14, and Colossians 3:16 in at least two different versions each: read them out loud, to yourself or in your group gathering. As you listen, which words matter to you in particular? Can you say why those words affect you? What might this tell you about how the words about the Jesus Christ, Word of God, are received by others?
2. Anton refers to three senses of “words:” Jesus Christ as the Word of God, the words of scripture, and the words we use. In what sense do these three different “words” matter? What are the connections between them? Do the connections matter?
3. Early in the piece Anton notes that words were used irresponsibly in the recent presidential campaign. Then she observes this: “For people of integrity, their words are enough. Nothing more is required. Actions reflect the spoken word.” In what way do you see a connection between your understanding of scripture and your actions? Are there ways you would like your actions to more closely express your spoken words?
4. In Romans 8:26 we read that when “we do not know how to pray as we ought, that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words.” How do we listen to words from God, whether they are the words of scripture or the Word of God, Jesus Christ? Sometimes we need to listen in silence for the words being spoken to have weight. Which experiences in worship or private devotion have allowed you to listen in quiet to what God is saying to you? How does listening help you say clearly what you want to say as a Christian?
5. “The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood...we saw the glory with our own eyes.” This paraphrase of John 1:14 from *The Message* implies the way we, disciples of Christ, communicate the Word of God in our midst. Anton talks about words and formation using the example of texting. What kind of Christian space do you want to create for others through your words and actions?