

**Sermon**  
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*Words Matter*  
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Grace to you, and peace, from God the Creator and from our Lord Jesus who is the Christ, Amen.

One of the greatest lies ever perpetuated upon children is that “Sticks and stones may break their bones, but words can never hurt them.”

That is simply not true. Words matter. Consider the story of Helen Keller, who became both blind and deaf at an early preverbal age. Keller recalls the great turning point in her life. She writes, “Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word water first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten, and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that W A T E R. meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, and set it free.”

“That living word” – it sounds familiar, doesn’t it? This is language we use in the Lutheran tradition, to describe the way God comes to us, the way God speaks to us in and through the Bible. We teach that the Word of God is more than simply the dead letters on the page. Instead, it’s a living address, which enters our hearts, calling for radical change. It’s the way, again, that God speaks to us in and through the Bible, calling for repentance, revolution, and redirection in life.

Now, the climactic address of God’s living word is the event of the life-teaching, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through Christ – and I want you to hear this closely – God woos us and pleads with us: “I love you. I forgive you. I want you trust me, follow me. Enter the joy of my kingdom.” When we hear this call, which contains this word of personal address, “I love you,” we hear from the Bible, the Living Word.

Now, the Living Word comes to us in two forms; first, as law. What does the law do? The law, as summarized in the 10 Commandments, exposes us to our selfish, uncharitable ways. From birth, you might say, we are turned in on ourselves. You all remember roly-polies, Right? (Or pill bugs.) When I was a kid I used to play with pill bugs all the time. I lived on a farm. I had a lot of free time. A lot of weird things happened, but I played with pill bugs – and what happens when you touch them? They curl up. That’s the human condition. That’s what Christianity calls Original Sin.

The Living Word, which comes to us, second, as Gospel, opens us back up. It touches us with love, namely, through the word of forgiveness, which frees us to live as God intended, no longer simply for ourselves, but for others. Martin Luther defines this Living Word, this Gospel as “the great fire of the love of God for us.” Let me repeat

that: “the great fire of the love of God for us, whereby the heart and conscience become happy, secure and content. “

This is what preaching the Christian faith means. This is why such preaching is called “Gospel.” It means “a joyful, good and comforting message.” That’s what you’re supposed to hear from this pulpit. That’s what you’re supposed to sing in our hymnody. That’s what we’re invited to share with one another, and with those outside the walls of the sanctuary.

The Living Word comes to us first as a word of exposure – it exposes to us our original orientation, but it is followed by the Gospel, which says, “you are free.” The Gospel touches us with God’s love and opens us to God and others.

Now, it may surprise you, but there’s not much “Gospel” in today’s Gospel. You will, however, I mean, there’s all this talk about “being one as I am one and we are one and all as one...” and I get a little confused.

However, you *will* find the Gospel in the second reading. That is, First Peter. Now before we get to the Gospel in First Peter as well as why it matters, I want to say a few radical things about Peter itself, especially for you SPU students sitting up here. One of you has taken the class of mine, so you know how radical things get – you ready?

All right, what I want to do is focus first on the letter of Peter itself and say a few words about the time it was written, the situation to which it was written, the response the author provides his audience, and finally the message of hope, which will take us to the second reading directly.

So, the situation indirectly described in the letter of Peter points toward a time *after* Peter’s death. The language, style, content, and thought would seem inappropriate to Peter, the Galilean fisherman and missionary to the Jews. Why would it seem inappropriate? Because he was illiterate! He didn’t have the capacity to read or write the excellent and sophisticated Greek in this letter. However, the lack of references to the life and teaching of the early earthly Jesus, the Christological emphasis on the Cosmic Christ and the address to Gentile Christians, who had previously lived a sinful idolatrous life, point to a *disciple* of Peter writing in the name of the revered apostle. Thus, most critical scholars interpret the document as a letter from the last decade of the first century CE, written in Peter’s name, in order to claim that its teaching represented the Apostolic Faith.

What’s so radical about what you just heard? Peter didn’t write First Peter! Peter didn’t write First Peter. There are all kinds of clues in the text that point us in this direction, but before I get to one of them, let me just say this: usually the response is, “Oh, so you’re just telling me this is a forgery?” And I would say no, this isn’t a forgery. This is a tribute. This is a tribute. Students of teachers, back in the day, would write in their name as a tribute to their memory and to establish rhetorical credibility to the writing. (Now, in my classes at the university, I don’t want students writing in my name, let’s be clear about that!) But in the first century, this was a way of honoring the teacher.

So, how do we know it was written later in the first century after Peter died? Well in the fifth chapter, verse 13, you'll hear or see a reference to "our sister church in Babylon." The idea is, Babylon is a fairly unique reference in the New Testament, and it refers to Rome. Now, what happens in Rome that's really bad for Jews and Christians in the year 70 AD? There's a big temple and it's destroyed. The Jewish Temple. The Wailing Wall is all that exists today of what once was the Jewish Temple. The Romans destroyed it in 70 AD. As an example of what's called a "*cryptogram*," Christians began referring to Rome as "Babylon," because, why? 500 years before, the Babylonians destroyed the First Temple. Now, why on earth would these Christians, after 70 AD, use the language "Babylon" instead of Rome? Well, you don't want to name directly the institution or power that's persecuting you. So, you speak in code, you use a cryptogram that would have been known to Jews and Christians across Asia Minor at the time. So that's one: **Time** – late first century, presumably written by a disciple of Peter in Peter's name as a tribute and a way to establish its credibility.

That sounds like a lecture. I have just a little more, and then we're gonna get to the juicy stuff.

Second: **Situation** – The letter addresses the critical situation in the lives of its audience, who once participated in the social and cultural life of their communities, but since their conversion to Christ have become marginalized and abused. The society to which they once belonged, now considers them unwelcome, even dangerous, as a sectarian movement. Acts 25 refers to this as "the sect everywhere spoken against." While Christians are called to suffer for the name, the abuse is mostly verbal. The positive attitude toward the state indicates there is yet no overt government persecution, except perhaps for occasional arbitrary acts by subordinate officials. First Peter offers realistic encouragement and instructions to Christians attempting to live faithfully in such a situation.

So listen closely, what kind of abuse were the Christians experiencing? We read in 1 Peter 4:3-4 "You have already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do. Living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing and lawless idolatry. They are surprised that you no longer join them in the same excesses of dissipation, and so they blaspheme." Another way of translating the word blaspheme here in the Greek is "they malign you, they slander you." Why? Because now you're boring. Now you are a Christ-follower. Now, you no longer party. Now you no longer engage in carousing, lawless idolatry, or drunkenness. Again, 1 Peter 4:14: "If you are reviled," Peter writes, or the author of Peter writes, to his audience...

(What does *reviled* mean? What does that term mean? Do you ever go around and use the word "I revileth that person"? No! This is an older term in the English language. Listen closely – and this is why I said words matter at the beginning – "to revile" is to criticize in an abusive or insulting manner. Bullies, for example, will often revile both on the playground, and now online. That's *reviling*. It's using abusive language to

criticize something about somebody, maybe their appearance, maybe the sound of their voice, or in this case, the faith they have now in Jesus Christ.)

“If you are reviled,” this author says, “for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory which is the Spirit of God is resting in you.”

So, let’s put this together. Written at the end of the first century, in the name of Peter, to a group of people who were suffering, primarily verbal persecution for their new faith in Christ. That’s a snap, right?

Now we go to three – and trust me, the really exciting part of this message is just around the corner. So, hold on,

“Just as all Christians are instructed to respect the government,” – so now we’re talking about the author’s instructions for how to live in a context of verbal, and sometimes physical, persecution. So again, “just as all Christians are instructed to respect the government authorities, so the most vulnerable Christians, slaves of unbelieving masters and wives of unbelieving husbands, are instructed to fit uncomplainingly into the given structures of society as a testimony to their faith; such behavior may convert the oppressor.”

Now, let’s unpack that. What is this *Commentary* saying? It’s saying that, in order to live in the context of persecution, this author advises his audiences to refrain from drawing attention to themselves. “Don’t piss off the government. Don’t upset the authorities. Don’t unnecessarily add to the persecution you are now experiencing.”

That, my friends, is a survival strategy. It’s also used by Paul in Romans 13, where Paul says, “submit to government authorities.” Paul is not some kind of authoritarian or dictator. Instead, he’s writing to a small minority sect of Christ-followers who are already being persecuted for their faith. Paul simply wants to say, or Peter in this case, “don’t make your suffering worse. The Lord will return soon.”

In other words, and I wish sometimes I have this closer to my heart, “shut your mouth. Be quiet. You don’t have to tell everybody everything.” Right? (Talk about preacher preaching to himself!) You don’t have to share all the details of a project or a concern that you have; just refrain, and trust in God.

Now what does this bring? Well, it brings *hope*, because such behavior, while it may not convert the oppressor, is still following the example set by Christ, and will be vindicated at the Last Judgment that is soon to come. So, “Christ will soon return”; there is your hope. Now you have all four components necessary for making sense of this letter: when it was written, why it was written, what the author suggests in the face of the situation, and a final word of hope.

Which brings us to our Second Reading. I’d like you to take a look at First Peter. It’s on the back of your bulletin. And I want you to play a game with me: see if you can identify which verses speak to you or me directly with good news. Take a look. See if

you can identify a verse or verses that speak directly to you with good news or reassurance.

“13”

Yeah, that’s a great example. “Rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ’s sufferings.” Now, Peter, in this case speaks like Paul, not just to individuals, but the “you” here in Greek is plural. So, I imagine them kind of like early Texans, which is to say, “rejoice insofar as *y’all* are sharing Christ’s suffering, so that *y’all* may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.” Okay, that’s a great example.

Another verse was highlighted in our children’s sermon today. What was it? It’s one of my favorites: 1 Peter 5:7, which says, “Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.”

Now that’s one; what’s another?

“<sup>6</sup>Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. “

“Humble yourself.” Is that good news? That’s law. Now that’s law, that’s telling us what we *should* do. The good news is saying *what God has done*. The exalting part? Yes, good news. Very good news. The humbling part not so much. But the exalting part? Absolutely. Yeah.

I think there’s an even clearer example of good news in verse seven, however:

“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” What’s the good news there? God cares for you! That means each of you, each of you, each of you. This is directly addressing us, you might say, from 2000 years ago, “Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.” Now listen to the *New Living Translation*. It provides an alternative: “Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you.”

So what are your worries? We heard “fear of the closet” and “fear of witches” earlier in the children’s message, but what about the rest of us? What are your worries? What keeps you up at night? Is it an upcoming exam? Amen. That’s scary. How about public speaking? Sometimes I’m terrified before I get into the pulpit. Vannady did a wonderful job in the children’s message, but I have a feeling you were probably a little nervous, right, Van? Yes, super nervous. So these are some of the fears that we have. What else? What keeps you up at night?

I just learned recently that the surface of the ocean and one part on one region of the Earth has risen by 13 degrees Celsius since it was measured in the night. That’s terrifying. That’s a worry I have: climate change. What else? Are you worried about the church, that our church – although today is a wonderful exception – is shrinking? Or are your worries that we don’t have enough money – or *you* don’t have enough money? What are your worries, your fears? Of being alone? Whether it’s being presently in a relationship and worrying about how strong that relationship is, or, as we heard in our forum today, the prospect of dying alone? By the way – you remember

this – A couple of weeks ago I mentioned that of all major US cities west of the Rockies, you are more likely to die alone in Seattle than any other. That’s terrifying. And for somebody like me, who doesn’t have kids, who’s going to take care of me, right? So, fear of being alone; the prospect of cancer – we have several people in this congregation recently who have been concerned and scared about a cancer diagnosis, or a loved one in poor health. You get the idea of what this author is inviting us to do. Whatever our fears, whether they were persecution in the first century, or exams in the 21<sup>st</sup>, we are invited to cast those to God.

Now here’s what I want you to do. If you had a chance, you would have taken that little slip, the post-it note, next to the bulletins. If not, I invite you to take out one of the pew cards in front of you. I want you to write on that card something that’s keeping you up at night, a worry and anxiety, a fear.

Ready, go.

Please do not include your name on this little piece of paper or on a pew card. Again, I’m asking you to identify a true concern, or worry, or a fear.

Now Vannady is going to come around to the aisle, and he’s going to collect these, and then systematically I’m going to read each one, it’ll take about an hour...I’m totally kidding.

What I invite you to do is cast your fears, you might say, into God, into this box. Get rid of your fears, you’re worries. So cast your worries here onto God.

Okay, here’s my question to you. What was that like?

How does it feel, to cast a worry you have onto God? What’s that like for you? How can you continue to do this? Well my answer to you is this:

“Cast away, pray every day.”

You can continue this practice in conversation with God, by casting your worries upon God, because God cares for you. And that’s the good news.

Now it’s a surprise as to what I’m going to do with these fears.

But the good news here is this: God is big enough to receive your concerns.

God is big enough to carry your fears. God is big enough to embrace and take into Godself, our worries, both individually and as a community.

Why did I invite you to do this?

*Because God cares.*

And there’s still more. We have one more “Gospel” verse in First Peter, can you find it?

Verse 10? That’s exactly it! Let’s hear it:

“<sup>10</sup>And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.” What’s the text saying to you personally? Things may seem bad. But that’s God’s promise to you. God will restore you, and support you, and strengthen you, and establish you.

I keep coming back to our students who are here with us today. It’s hard to look away from all of you. But that is the promise – that that exam it will be over, right? The quarter will end. Your paper will be written. Things might seem difficult now, but God has called you to God’s glory, and you will be restored, supported, strengthened – and that’s good news. That’s the Living Word.

My point this morning is simply this: Words matter. Words matter. We know that was true for Helen Keller. We know that I was true for Martin Luther. And we know that is true for each of us. Just think of how you feel when somebody says, “I love you” versus somebody saying, “I hate you.” Words matter. May God, who cares for us, who receives our worries and fears, give us the spirit of courage and faith, and restore us to God’s glory, in Jesus’ name,

Amen.