

The Power of a Word

Laurie Haas



Luke 7:1-10

Our black lab Sam was a great family dog. She was fiercely loyal and protective yet so gentle she could retrieve a balloon in her mouth without popping it. She would even allow me to put my tiny hands into her dog food bowl as she was woofing down her food. (Now why my parents would let me eat dog food that I apparently loved is for another sermon or maybe even counseling!) Sam was a great watchdog and basically kept our yard free of any unwanted animals or strangers. She had one awesome party trick that seemed to delight my family. When someone pulled up our driveway she started barking, which sounded like she meant business. She would stay right beside my dad and me, but if she didn't know the person who might be walking towards us, you could see the hair standing up on the back of her neck as she continued barking. The smart traveler never took his eyes off of her. If the person was a friend of my dad's or an unsuspecting teenage boy, my dad could hardly wait to give Sam the word. Dad would yell, "Charge!" which sent the visitor sprinting back to his car. For Sam, this command meant to lie down. So she dropped down at our feet, knowing we wouldn't be needing her this time.

The power of a word.

Like you, I've heard and spoken many words in my lifetime. I read that women speak 20,000 words a day, while men utter a mere 7,000 words. A male Professor of Psychology at the University of Arizona-named Matthias Mehl claims that the chatty female and the silent male are recognizable archetypes, but there were no studies in existence that validated that claim or that showed that women actually spoke more than men. In fact the subjects that talked the most and also talked the least happened to be men.

I don't know how it is for you in your home. My

husband lives with one wife and 5 daughters...6 women. We aren't counting words or anything, but let's just say there is rarely a quiet moment.

But maybe counting the number of words is focusing on the wrong thing. Perhaps it's not how much we say, but it's what we say. And ultimately what our words say about us. You see words have power...power to build up or power to destroy, without even physically touching someone.

In the book, *How Full Is Your Bucket*, the authors Tom Rath and his grandfather Donald Clifton shared a case study about the American prisoners in the Korean War. These American soldiers were detained in POW camps that weren't particularly cruel or unusual. They had adequate food, water and shelter. They were not subjected to common physical torture tactics of the time (Like bamboo shoots driven under their fingernails) Yet, 38% of the prisoners died in these camps: **the highest death rate in U.S. military history.**

The North Koreans used words to systematically erode the prisoners' emotional support and to destroy their hope. They did this in 4 ways:

1. First they encouraged words that informed. The captors gave rewards for snitching on each other, but nothing ever happened to the person who was snitched on. (This broke relationships and helped to turn the men against one another.)
2. Second, they had group sessions that only allowed words of self-criticism. The men had to confess all the bad things they had done—as well as all the good things they could have done but failed to do. (This eroded the care, trust, respect and social acceptance among the American soldiers.)
3. Third, they encouraged words of disrespect and insolence to break their loyalty to leadership and country. (One time, a colonel advised a soldier to not drink the water from the rice paddy field because he knew it had organisms in the water that might kill him. The soldier said, "I don't have to listen to you. You're not a Colonel anymore; you're just a lousy prisoner like me. You take care

of yourself, and I'll take care of me." The soldier died of dysentery a few days later.)

4. Finally the captors withheld all positive words of support from home but gave the men the negative words. (For example, if a prisoner received a supportive letter from home, the captors withheld it. All negative letters were given to the prisoners: things like a relative dying or overdue bills telling them they were losing their house, or from a wife who wrote that she gave up hope that they were still alive and so she was remarrying.)

The power of a word.

In our Scripture lesson from today, of course we are reminded again how Jesus can use the power of a word without a physical touch to actually save a life. But what's curious to me, is that the word actually came from the "enemy." A Centurion is a powerful Roman Soldier. His rank was the equivalent of a regimental sergeant-major. (For those of us without military experience, he was like 11 ranks up from the bottom and only two from the top of an Army ranking.)

“...Words have power...power to build up or power to destroy, without even physically touching someone.”

This guy had power. Centurions were the backbone of the Roman army. Well the Roman Army spent a good deal of their time oppressing and persecuting the Jews and the Christians in the New Testament.

In the verses leading up to this encounter with the Centurion, Jesus had been teaching on loving our enemies, be merciful just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge; forgive one another. Hear my words and act on them. And now, Luke tells us that Jesus gets the opportunity to put his own words into action. This

Roman soldier sends a few Jewish elders to ask Jesus for some help. Well first, I'm not sure I exactly want to help my enemy. I guess if I had just preached on it, I should probably try to act on it. And of course, Jesus stops to listen to the request.

And what is the request? To come heal the Centurion's slave, whom he "highly valued."

Stop right there. We have to understand something about slavery in this culture, if we are going to get to the nature of this request. In Roman law a slave was defined as a living tool; he had no rights; a master could beat him and even kill him if he chose. A Roman writer on estate management recommends the farmer to examine his implements every year and to throw out those which are old and broken, and to do the same with his slaves. So for this Centurion to use his position of power and his words to heal a "mere" slave says something about him as a person.

This reminds me of the movie *Schindler's List*. How many of you have seen *Schindler's List*? You know this is an award winning masterpiece by Steven Spielberg made in 1993. It is based on the life of Oskar Schindler

who was a greedy, broken, self-absorbed German businessman in Nazi Germany. He discovered a way to get rich by using the displaced Jews in Poland as his slave labor in an enamelware factory.

The most powerful word in this time was one's name... on a list. If one's name wasn't on the "essential skills" list, he or she would be shipped in a cattle car to their death. Schindler's first recruit for his "pots and pans" factory was an intelligent accountant with a heart of gold named Itzhak Stern. Stern recruits Jews from the

list considered “not essential”- you know, teachers, musicians.

Schindler becomes wealthy, but somewhere along the line his eyes are opened to the lives of people, real people like you and me who have children and grandchildren, who had hopes and dreams. Real people who have value. Just like the Centurion, Schindler now has compassion and love for people who had been cast into the role of a slave.

Oskar Schindler used his resources to create a list of 1,200 words. Each word was a name. Each word had power. Each word gave life. Schindler used all of his money to buy each Jew their life to go to his “new” factory, rather than to the death camp.

The power of a word.

I think we all know that words have the power to destroy, like in the Korean POW camp. And that words have the power to give life, like the words on Schindler’s List. But I think this passage shows us who truly has the power of life, both here and forever.

The Centurion was a powerful man and people did what he told them to do. But he didn’t have the power to save his servant in this world, let alone in the next. What the Centurion had though, was a faith in the one who does have the power. He said, “Jesus - speak the word, and my servant will be healed.” The Centurion knew that Jesus alone had the power to give life. In the Gospel of John, Peter asked, “Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.”

On this Memorial Weekend, I imagine that most of us will pause to give thanks to God for the men and women who died while serving our country. This act of remembering often takes us to the cemetery of other friends and family members whose only uniform may have been an apron or a pair of coveralls. And while we mourn our loss on earth, we know that death is not the final word.

The power of a word? Listen to this passage from John 1: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being

through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

What if every word we choose points to a faith that we have in the word, Jesus Christ? The power of our words, bathed in love, pointing to the one who is the word and has the words of eternal life.

I want to conclude with a story from a book with just two little words in its title. It’s called *Let’s Roll!* The author, Lisa Beamer, was a mother of two young boys and pregnant with her daughter when her husband boarded United Flight 93 on September 11, 2001. In their young family, the words, “Let’s Roll” meant, let’s put our shoes on, let’s head to the door; it’s time to set out on another adventure, let’s go out and do what we need to do.” Let’s go out and do what we need to do.

So when these words were recorded on that fateful flight, Lisa knew her husband Todd was going to do whatever needed to be done to try to save the lives of those on the airplane, so they could all return to their families. Now we all know that Todd and his newfound friends weren’t able to stop the terrorists from crashing the plane, but they did save the lives of countless people by diverting the jet so it didn’t crash into the White House or the Capitol. Instead it went down in an open field.

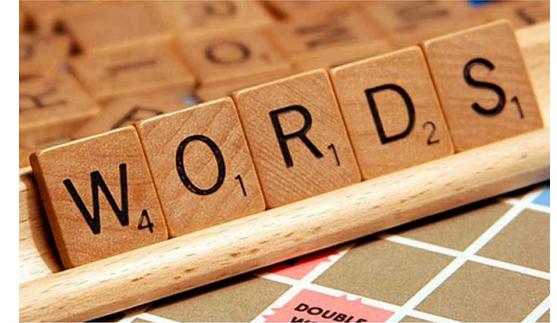
Lisa contrasted the two memorial services she attended for her husband. The memorial service in the field for all of the victims was filled with encouraging words about how they aren’t alone and how we will always remember their family...but there was virtually no reference to the power of God to sustain them. It struck Lisa how hopeless the world is when God is factored out of the equation. Lisa’s brother said, “It was heart-wrenching to see people grieving without hope.”

At Todd’s Memorial service in his church, on the day before, of course there was sadness and sorrow, but there was also joy. Because as Christians, we mourn

but not as those who have no hope. We know who has the final word.

Todd’s grieving father, David offered a prayer that is worth repeating for us today. He prayed, “Almighty God, thank you for Todd Beamer...Thank you again for your precious gift, your Son, Jesus Christ, who died for us. Heavenly Father, I have known what that meant, but it is only in these recent days that I have a little more understanding of how it felt. I thank you so much that our son, Todd, has the promise of eternity because of the gift of your Son...Also we pray, heavenly Father, that Todd’s witness and his actions can be used to your glory in the things that matter most.”

We may not be a powerful military leader like the Centurion or a wealthy businessman like Schindler, but we all have a circle of influence. Our words have power to help or to hurt. But when our words reflect our faith in the One who has the power of eternal life, we shine a light in the darkness. And the darkness will not overcome it.



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