

November 20, 2011
“ Living Words: The Speech of the Soul”
Genesis 11:1-9 John 1:1-5
First United Church of Arvada
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I can't draw. This is a bit of a disappointment to me. As I look out my window at the big oak tree in my neighbor's yard in the early morning light, the rosy glow of the sun is touching its charcoal bark and creating interesting shadows and textures. The now bare branches are stretching out in all directions as they yearn upward into the winter blue sky. Within a few moments, the light of the sun has begun to come in at a slightly different angle, penetrating through the naked branches in a new way, producing a subtly different hue and changing the picture dramatically. I cannot recreate this image. I don't have the talent for transferring my visual experience to paper or canvas, and the image is always changing. So, I cannot prolong the beauty of this image or share it with others. Still, I haven't given up trying to draw. And despite my lack of artistic talent, occasionally, something nice appears.

I know that for many, this same feeling of frustration surfaces in their use of language— writing and speaking. It is a challenge to communicate what we see, care about, or have come to understand? We use words to create a bridge between our perceptions, thoughts and feelings, and the perceptions, thoughts, and feelings of others. Words are the fragile symbolic footbridges we use to cross the gaping abyss between us and all other human beings. Our prayers, sermons and songs show us that words can also be the fragile footbridge between ourselves and our God. Yet, this footbridge, often, feels pretty shaky to us. As with my drawing, sometimes I can only find “stick figure” words in my feeble attempt to convey a complex thought or a tender feeling.

It seems to me that good writers share a profound faithfulness to the words themselves—to the rich history they carry and the layers of meaning they hold—to the seed of the imagination to be found within them and to their capacity to be containers for soul. They understand that words are not simply utilitarian tools of communication. A well-turned phrase has beauty and symmetry. Poetry speaks to the essence of our humanness and to the nature of the Divine. Fine lyrics when put to music, will step into music's river, into its current of tempo and rhythm and pitch, and the human heart will float along. A well-crafted joke that is cleverly and playfully true to life, brings a delight, which can renew our faith in life. I guess we are lucky to have "Matt's Moment" in our service. Words have the power to heal and inspire and console and unite.

And yet we abuse words and this abuse brings them sorrow. We undervalue them, we exploit them in the service of our own greed. We wield them like swords to oppress or deceive others or to spew our anger and hatefulness. The dialogue in modern movies is peppered with the same few four letter words. I find this disturbing--not just for the ugliness of what is said, but for what is *not* said, for the missed opportunity to use words as articulate expressions of what is real and truly felt, not just as missiles of foul, and boringly repetitious, explosion.

Even in the world of education, words can become empty and abstract and, all too often, used with the intention of gaining control or mastery. When we think of someone who is interested in words we often think of the traditional image of the librarian or the grammar teacher with a pinched mouth, humorless manner and an insatiable demand for perfection. We may think of the repetitious study of vocabulary words or the agonizing experience of writing about subjects we care nothing about. Not many of us relish being "lectured to." Surprisingly, the root of the word "lecture" is the Greek word, "legein," which means "to gather." If we can imagine a lecture as a rich gathering of mind and heart and experience—such as we might imagine the gathering of wood for a fire or berries along a mountain trail, we may get a very different feeling for the word "lecture." Though words are often used

to control, we must not forget that good words have the power to liberate--to free us into the deeper imagination within them—to free us into the imagination, which lives at the core of our own being. They hold within themselves a fluidity and moistness, able to take us into life's deep river of meaning.

Listen again to the opening of John's Gospel—his beautiful expression of the Good News of Christ. "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." The term found within this passage, which we translate into the English, "word" has a depth that the English translation cannot fully express. The Greek word is "logos." Even if the reader doesn't initially grasp the meaning of "logos", this powerful ancient word, clues us to think bigger, to look deeper and to open the door to mystery. "In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with God and the Logos was God."

In his book, *Mystical Christianity*, John Sanford, delves into the deeper meaning of "Logos." He claims that if the author of John meant to express the more ordinary meaning of "word," he would have used the Greek "*rema*." "Logos" encompasses the loftier idea of "thought" and "deed" and "power." Logos is the expression of God's innermost nature, the indwelling power of God in creation, giving creation its exquisite order. It is also the profound expression or voice of God, which is available to the human soul.

Words nourish us which is why we speak of our "mother tongue." Good words want to live—they yearn to shine their brilliance into our hearts and minds. Most of us don't think of etymology, the study of words, as very exciting or liberating, but it can be. It is more than just a bunch of Latin and Greek root words in small print in the dictionary. "Etymos, means "truth" and "Logos," means word, and so etymology is "truth speaking." Through etymology we learn that words have long histories of meaning and carry the evolution of their meaning within themselves. A good word can free us to imagine life in a new way. That is why I often return to the root of a

word and its parallel in other times, places and languages in my sermons. When we see words as living and growing, rather than static and dead, it permits us to be playful with them.

In his book, *Words as Eggs*, Russell Lockhart refers to a passage in *Alice in Wonderland*, in which Alice encounters Humpty Dumpty, a big talkative egg. Humpty Dumpty's wild freedom with words confuses Alice. He exclaims, "There's glory for you," and when Alice says that she doesn't know what he means, he says, "Of course you don't, till I tell you. I meant, 'there's a nice knock down argument for you!'" Annoyed, Alice says, "Glory doesn't mean that," and Humpty Dumpty replies, "It means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." But Alice is not convinced. The question is, says Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things." No, says Humpty, "The question is which is to be master—that's all." Humpty Dumpty was playful with words but also arrogant in his treatment of them. And we all remember from the nursery rhyme what happened to him, don't we? He falls and breaks and "all the kings horses and all the king's men, couldn't put Humpty together again." Yes, we may play with words, but finally, we have to respect them. In fairy tale, and rhyme, limerick and song, words invite us to play, but even in play, they, not we, are finally the master--they hold the soul, which we are invited to experience and to share. In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God."

Today we gave Bibles to two of the children of the church. We gave them our sacred book full of the words that communicate our faith. It is a book full of layers of oral, and then written, history in different languages—of poems and praise, mythology and lamentation. The Bible was pieced together by human beings in order to make sense to those who would come later. Its words are challenging and confusing, contradictory, and comforting. These words hold the "soul" of our faith. They, not we, are the master. Yet, even so, they invite us to play with them and to help them live again.

Think of the story from Genesis this morning. The people of Babel spoke one language and built themselves a great city with a tower on top reaching to the heavens. Then, curiously, God intervened to mix things up. God confused their language and scattered the people. Why in the world would God do this? We seek so hard to find understanding among each other. We seek to find a “common language,” of thought and purpose to unite the world’s people and yet, here, we learn that God deliberately scatters them to confuse and divide. Language is not to be our tool of mastery. We must be in modest service to its deepest truth or we face the very real danger that our egotistical towers will turn to Babel-- Psychobabble, religious babble, legal babble, scientific babble, economic babble, and political babble. Not only did the arrogantly ridiculous mythical figure, Humpty Dumpty, fall, but even a tower as solid and substantial as the World Trade Center could, and did, crumble and fall as the result of human beings’ inability to understand each other. Humanity will always be reminded, when their hubris takes them too far, that they are not, and will never be, God.

“In the beginning was the word and the word was God...” Logos is the language of soul, a living word that speaks within us all.