

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Dan Krebill, co-pastor

October 9, 2016
28th Sunday in Ordinary Time
2 Timothy 2:8-15

Stewardship of Grace

Sometimes, words can get in the way of meaning.

That may seem counterintuitive at first, because without words it can be difficult, if not impossible to convey meaning or definition. But nevertheless, sometimes, words can get in the way of meaning.

Take for example the current election season in which we find ourselves. There are lots of words flying around. Words, more words, and even more words spoken and written in order to convince and sway voters one way or another. And as the day of reckoning approaches—that is election day—it seems that there are even more words flying around. So much so that some potential voters are flummoxed and befuddled or even disillusioned to the point that they lose any sense of purpose in casting a vote. Sadly, many of them end up staying away from the polls on election day. Sometimes, words can get in the way of meaning.

This truth is not limited to politics. It can happen in other arenas of our lives where words can get in the way of meaning. This can even happen within our Christian faith. Too many words can obscure the basic truths of our faith.

From time to time there are those within the Christian tradition that start to work out complex and complicated theological assertions that can take on too much importance and prominence. For example, this can come up whenever I meet with those who are interested in learning about what is involved in becoming an official member of the church.

As I talk with them about the various steps in that process I tell them that they are to meet with the church session in order to be voted in to membership. The session, by the way, is made up of ruling elders who are elected by the congregation to be the spiritual leaders of the congregation and to manage its affairs. So when people request to become members, the session must formally vote in order to add them to our membership rolls.

There was a time in the church when that meeting of prospective new members and the session was actually an examination. In order to be received as members, it was expected that members would be able to express their Christian faith in such a way that it fell within some fairly specific parameters constituting what was considered to be orthodox Christian theology or beliefs—Presbyterian style. Of course new members knew this and were prepared to answer questions that were posed by members of the session to satisfy the body that these new members held beliefs and convictions consistent with others within the church.

Presbyterians were not alone in this practice, by the way. Many Christian churches had fairly specific expectations of the beliefs held by those who become church members.

When I tell people about this today I try to have a twinkle in my eye as I do so as to not scare them off. That practice of examining new members has gone by the wayside in the second half of the last century.

Today, we're clear that membership in the church—or maybe better put, membership in the body of Christ—is not a matter of believing the right things and being able to answer questions to prove

it. Membership is based on faith that comes from accepting God's grace given in Jesus. When a person joins the church, the questions asked are related to the fundamental question asked at baptism: Who is your Lord and Savior? Do you trust him? Do you want to follow him? And will you be a faithful disciple? Pretty simple and straightforward.

Now don't misunderstand me, there are lots of implications of those simple and straightforward assertions. There are implications that lead to shelves and shelves of books of Christian theology. And that theology is very important as we seek to better understand the world around us and how we are to live as God's people. But it's not that theology that fundamentally identifies us as disciples of Jesus. It's our faith and trust in him, our desire to follow him and to be faithful.

This shift from knowledge and belief back to fundamental faith came as a result of getting back to the basics. It was clearing out the words that had gotten in the way of meaning. Because remember, sometimes words can get in the way of meaning.

This is what is at the heart of what the apostle was talking about in the part of the second letter to Timothy that we read this morning. It begins with, "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David—that is my gospel. . . ." (2 Tim. 2:8) He goes on to emphasize this and then says, "Remind them of this, and warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening." (2 Tim. 2:14)

The letters to Timothy are traditionally understood to have been written by the apostle Paul to a young follower who was becoming a leader within the Christian community. The teaching here from the older and more seasoned apostle to the next generation of apostle in carrying on the ministry.

As we can elsewhere in the New Testament letters, we can infer from what is being taught or written about is in direct response to something that is happening that shouldn't be happening, or something not happening that should be happening. So when the apostle writes that they are to avoid wrangling over words we can be pretty darn sure that they were doing exactly what he warns them against. They were likely wrangling over words. And such wrangling was doing no good but only ruining those who are listening.

Wrangling over words that does nothing but ruin those who are listening. Sounds a lot to me like the maxim with which we began: sometimes words can get in the way of meaning.

A classic example of this that actually started with Christian theologians in the 13th century was the debate over how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. Believe it or not, while this specific question was not necessarily asked, many others regarding how much space an angel takes and the like were points of serious discussion and debate among many medieval theologians including the famous Thomas Aquinas. According to Wikipedia, "In modern usage, it therefore has been used as a metaphor for wasting time debating topics of no practical value, or questions whose answers hold no intellectual consequence, while more urgent concerns pile up." (*"How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?"* Wikipedia)

Sometimes words get in the way of meaning while more urgent concerns pile up.

So let's get back to those basics. "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David—that is my gospel, for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained." (2 Tim. 2:8-9) He goes on, "The saying is sure:

If we have died with him we will also live with him;
if we endure, we will also reign with him;
if we deny him, he will also deny us;
if we are faithless, he remains faithful—
for he cannot deny himself.” (2 Tim. 2:11-13)

My friends, sisters and brothers in Christ, this is so very basic to who we are as Christians. It is God’s amazing grace that we affirm and celebrate again and again, day after day, Sunday after Sunday, year after year. Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David—that is my gospel.

We are called to be stewards of this grace of God. As stewards we’re to strive to keep grace front and center in everything. For if we don’t start with grace, we deny that very grace. It is grace that saves us and puts us right with God. It is not our beliefs and convictions and practices and disciplines that lead to grace. No, they all flow from the grace of God given us in Jesus. It’s so simple and yet we like to add to it and make it more complicated.

We’re now in the middle of our annual financial stewardship campaign when you’re being asked to express your faith through a pledge of financial support of the church. It’s really pretty simple. But you know what? In a church like ours with a half million dollar budget, it’s real easy to very quickly get caught up in the details and minutia. This can happen on both the side of the church’s leadership making a case for your support and it can happen on the side of those who are being asked to make pledges of financial support.

We want to make a case why supporting our kids and families ministry, or camping ministry, or Presby Cats ministry, or mission projects near and far is really important. And this may lead to our givers also thinking specifically about particular aspects of the work of the church are more or less worthy of support.

When we start down this road, we’re beginning that over complexifying, that making more complicated road that we’re being cautioned against today.

The financial stewardship campaign is about one main thing: Expressing your commitment of financial support to follow Jesus as his disciple through the ministry and mission of this church.

I invite you to join Jody and me in keeping it simple - not getting it too complicated - by making a thoughtful, prayerful pledge that is proportionate to the grace you have received in God’s blessings in your life.

Enough said, because more words just might get in the way of this truth.

