

Sermon for Pentecost 3 – June 9, 2024

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Why We Speak

Why do we speak? It's sort of a silly question. It's such a given in our lives – we talk, yap, chat, write, text, email, send emojis, create memes, learn new languages, sing, and speak. The individual voice adds a layer of complexity to our words; no one speaks quite the way you speak. We speak all the time (some of us more than others...), and we do it for all sorts of reasons. Because we need something, because we want something, because we want to offer something, because we long for expression of self, because we long for connection and communication is a quick means to that end. We speak because something inside of us needs to get outside of us. We speak because there is a threat: shouting “fire,” yelling “help,” crying “stop.”

Why do we speak?

Some scientists who study the origins of language say that humans started speaking because we needed to negotiate. To work together. To exchange various goods. To ensure safety for our community or tribe. We evolved to use our tongues and throats and mouths in particular ways so that we could live together – so we might even flourish together.

Speaking is particular to humans. Yes, all sorts of animals communicate – with song and motions and gestures and even languages of movement. But humans speak – with verbs and nouns and adjectives, stringing sentences together. Do you know that with just 25 words, you could make over 15,000 sentences? Incredible! We're mammals of meaning-making, knitting together words and words until we speak our way into connection, building society as we go, creating things like global trade and rockets that travel to the moon and nuclear weapons that threaten to destroy everything we've ever made.

Why do we speak? How could we not?

But here's another question, perhaps a more fitting question for a sermon: Why do Christians speak? How do we speak? What do we speak?

The Apostle Paul, in this piece of his letter to the Corinthians, says, quoting a psalm, “I believed, and so I spoke.” He goes on in the present tense and says, “We also believe, and so we speak.”

We need a bit of context to understand why Paul is speaking this to the Corinthians. A bit earlier in this letter, he writes to the Corinthians:

“Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by all, and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets that are human hearts.”

It’s an evocative piece of Paul’s writing, beautiful and sharp at the same time. Surely, he says, we don’t have to recommend ourselves to you again? Do we need to use our speech to negotiate terms? This is silly, he implies!

You know us. We know you. You yourselves are a letter, written on our own hearts. You are a letter of Christ written with the Spirit of the living God on tablets of the human hearts. We know that we are for one another and with one another and a part of Christ together.

Paul has had some disagreements with the Corinthians. They’ve gone back and forth in their correspondences; tears have been shed; words were exchanged, as they say.

But Paul wants to assure them of his continued fondness, the truth above all truth: they are a letter of Christ.

But now this letter of Christ must be spoken, read, shared. “We also believe, and so we speak.”

This is at the heart of Christian speech. Our speech should flow from our belief; we speak *because* we believe.

What have you spoken this week? Reflect on the words that came out of you. Did they reflect your trust in Jesus Christ? Did they come from a place of faith? What did you say and how did you say it?

We fall short of Paul's words – we often don't speak because we believe. Timid in the public sphere, afraid of talking about our faith, scared that we'll offend someone, nervous that we'll get it wrong. We'd rather "preach with our lives" than with our lips.

It's difficult to put words to our faith, isn't it? Even for a preacher, even for someone who has studied the faith for years and years, it can still be a challenge, to bring to light that letter that is written on our hearts.

But here's the thing. There is a letter written on your heart. Christ himself wrote it. It goes something like this, "You are beloved, dear child. I created you, I came to be with you, I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are not alone in this life or in your death. Your sins have been forgiven, you have been washed clean, you have been made new. I will not leave you or forsake you. You are mine. You are loved."

We might need to stop speaking so that we can listen to Christ's letter on our hearts. So that we might hear his words to us, his voice that calls our names, his speech of peace and goodness and love. By listening to the letter written on our hearts, by listening to the words of Jesus, by being pulled ever deeper into the story of God, we might then learn to speak from such a place. To read this letter out loud to the world around us.

Episcopalians have long loved the quote attributed to St. Francis – "Preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary, use words." At this point, it is necessary. It is necessary to use words, to begin speaking our belief. To excavate that letter written on our hearts and to share that letter with others. How else will they know the glorious story of Jesus Christ? How else will they know that they are not defined by their worst sin? How else will they know that there is a family of God waiting to welcome them with open hearts? How else will they know that God is for them?

We share the letter written on our hearts, because it is a gift given to us by God. It is the greatest love letter of all time. And who doesn't want to receive a love letter? Who doesn't want to hear that they are beloved by the Creator of heaven and earth, that they are known for who they truly are, that they've been given gifts to use for the good purposes of God, that they can change for the good, that there is hope even in the mess, that in the end, love has won.

To keep such a message to ourselves, to bury it deep within us, is to slow the movement of the Spirit, the message of Jesus Christ, the Word of God. It is meant to be believed. It is meant to be spoken. It is meant to be lived.

Christ has written a letter on your heart. He has created you to speak it to those near and far. Will you proclaim it boldly to the world around you?