

“O Lord, open my lips . . .”
(A Bi-labial Plosive Prayer of Praise)

O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will proclaim your praise.
(Psalm 51:15)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the 14th Sunday after Pentecost, **August 26, 2018**
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In last week’s message using the Rosetta Stone to speak of the gift human language my text was the Genesis 11 story of the Tower of Babel, which I suggested was the Big Bang of human language, an explosion of tongues into the world. Our worship opened with Charles Wesley’s “*O, for a Thousand Tongues to Sing.*” Of human language I wrote a sentence I want to expand upon this morning, “*something beyond our comprehension is happening whenever our breath is winded gently through teeth and lips to form a word.*”

Often my mornings, at some point, breathe the beautiful prayer of King David in Psalm 51 which I’ve used this morning as a refrain, having the congregation repeat it three times in our Call to Worship, “*O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will proclaim your praise.*”

The study of linguistics, the opening of the lips and the fashioning of words, has long fascinated me. When as a child my parents noted I had a speech impediment they arranged for lessons in phonics in a beautiful ante-bellum home in Pine Bluff, (now on the National Register) of a local teacher skilled in linguistics. Her name was Arie Beall, mother of Martha Beall. Martha was one year younger than my dad, and they dated several times in high school. Martha would later marry John Mitchell, who became President Richard Nixon’s Attorney General during the dark days of Watergate. An outspoken person whose words contributed to bringing down the president, she was labeled “*Martha the Mouth*” or “*Mouth of the South.*” The expressway coming into Pine Bluff is named the Martha Mitchell Expressway, and as the former President Nixon would tell David Frost in his famous 1977 interviews, “*if it hadn’t been for Martha Mitchell, there’d have been no Watergate.*” So, I find it fun to think that I was taught to form words by the same woman who taught the *Mouth of the South*, her mother! Though but a small child I remember Mrs. Beall and what seemed like hours in speech exercises, forming sounds, learning what happens when breath is sounded through tongue, teeth, and lips.

Speaking of Watergate, Bob Orben, who began his professional career as a comedy writer, transitioned right after Watergate into a political speech-writer for incoming President Gerald Ford. Bob’s professional life centered around words, communication. Having been a comedy writer helped Bob, because he realized that as important as content is, timing and emphasis is equally important, knowing how to “deliver a line.” Bob told the story of his son coming home

from college for summer after his freshman year. Hoping to strike up a conversation with his son, Bob asked, *“How are things going?”*

“Good,” his son replied, opening his lips for a single mono-syllabic Word.

When it was clear no elaboration was forthcoming, Bob said, *“Bet you can’t wait for mom’s cooking. How’s the food been at school?”*

“Good,” his son said, barely looking up.

After an awkward pause dad tried a third time to engage his son in conversation. *“I hear they finally tore down that old dormitory I stayed in years ago. How’s the new dorm?”*

The boy looked up, dipped his head in a half nod, and said, *“Good.”*

“Well, son, how are your studies going?”

“Good.”

“Have you decided yet on your major?”

“Yeah,” his son nodded.

“Finally!” Bob thought. *“A response other than ‘Good.’ We can move forward now!”*

“What’s your new major?” Bob asked.

The young man opened his lips to describe his major in one word, *“Communications.”*

Bob, the professional communicator struggling to communicate with his son, could hardly hide his smile as he nodded and replied, *“Good.”*

From the bible’s opening words in Genesis 1, *“And God said,”* we are faced with the most fundamental claim of scripture, that it embodies a communication. We are People of the Book. I find it amusing after telling Bob’s story that God’s first communication, spoken not once but seven times, was *“Good.”* Each day brought the divine assessment, *“Ki Tov,” It is Good.*

Created in the image of a God whose spoken Word was the catalyst of creation, verbal communication is fundamental to our being human. As from words came creation, we have the ability to frame our Imaginings with words, and by speaking it to prompt such action that brings the spoken thing into being. This is to be on the periphery of God likeness.

Ah, the magic of words! Last week I spoke of Rosetta Stone and Babbel as language acquisition software for adults. But is there anything more wondrous than a baby learning to speak? With sound even before speech, the child learns that they can create action. When a child’s learning of

this lesson evolves from sound to speech, now in a more refined and focused way they learn to create action. To be able to say “Mama” or “Dada,” and to see the response their words have prompted – smiles, joy, hugs, laughter. They are learning that words are magical, in an Abracadabra way. That magical word which causes what is shut to open originates from the Hebrew or Aramaic. Abracadabra means, “*I create what I speak.*”

Our lives revolve around communication. At home in our most intimate relationships, at school, church, and market in our social relationships, at play in our casual relationships. Learning to communicate properly is essential, and learning to communicate gracefully adds beauty to what is essential. I think of the many mediums of communication -- newspaper, television, magazines, books, social media.

Stuck somewhere in that list of communicative modes is that which has been my business for my entire adult life, the pulpit. Those who have ventured here speak of it as a Calling. I’ve grown over the years to not much like the word “*preaching,*” which has such a strong pejorative taste. “*Don’t preach to me!*”

Yet, as Paul said, God chose the foolishness of preaching to save, preaching as an instrument of divine communication, a catalyst of salvation. *Faith comes by hearing, Paul said, and hearing by the Word of God.* Is it not a wonder that God chose, through mere words -- that are never mere – to reveal God’s being, God’s character, and God’s love? No wonder one senses the awesome weight of such a Calling.

Feeling inadequate to fulfill this Calling is common, Moses being the patron saint of such ones, knowing he didn’t possess the requisite eloquence. The idea of conveying God’s words left him tongue-tied. “*And Moses said unto the LORD, ‘O my LORD, I am not eloquent: but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue.’*” (Exodus 4) I love God’s reply, “*And the LORD said unto him, ‘Who hath made man’s mouth? have not I the LORD? Now therefore go, and I will be with thy mouth, and teach thee what thou shalt say.’*”

I know how Moses felt, occasionally inflicted as I am with Spoonerisms. Do you know what a Spoonerism is? Spoonerisms are the fear of every communicator, embarrassing *tips of the slung*, I mean “*slips of the tongue.*” The word harkens back to the Rev. Dr. William Archibald Spooner (1844 – 1930), an Anglican priest and scholar at Oxford for over 60 years, rising to the prestigious position of Dean of New College at Oxford. An accomplished priest and scholar, his verbal slips were frequent and legendary, leaving often painful laughter with his linguistic somersaults, and prompting a new entry into the dictionary. *Spoonerism* is a sort of verbal leap frog that turns, as he once actually did, a “*well-oiled bicycle*” into a “*well-boiled icicle.*”

Officiating at a wedding, Dr. Spooner famously got ahead of himself, twisting his words, saying to the groom, “*Son, it is now kisstomary to cuss the bride.*” During World War 1 he said, “*When our boys come home from France, (instead of, “we will have the flags hung out”), he said, “we will have the hags flung out.*”

Was this man an idiot? No, Dr. Spooner's mind was, in fact, so nimble that his tongue evidently had a hard time keeping up with his brain, causing a trans-positioning of consonants known as *metathesis*. One of my favorite Spoonerisms – of a different, absent-minded sort -- was when, after a sermon to the student body he turned back to the pulpit and informed his student audience, *“In the sermon I have just preached, whenever I said Aristotle, I meant St. Paul.”*

I've felt like that. After four years at Warren FUMC and in 2006 being appointed to Mountain Home, I titled my final sermon, *“What I Meant to Say.”* It was my homiletical shot at a second chance. I've rarely left the pulpit (what preacher has?) without a sense of having missed the mark, having missed an opportunity, of not saying enough, or worse, of saying too much of what would never have been enough.

All of this, I suppose, is to say Words are important. Actually, I go further to say Words, at their core, are spiritual. The Hebrew and Greek words for “Spirit” (*ruach* and *pneuma*) may also be translated “wind,” or “breath.” Indeed, *“something beyond our comprehension is happening whenever our breath is winded gently through teeth and lips to form a word.”*

O Lord, open my lips! Words are formed by a movement of air from lungs, air either flowing unobstructed in a vowel sound or air obstructed using lips, teeth, and tongue, thus forming a consonant. Three consonant sounds -- p, b, m – are bilabials (meaning, two lips), sounds made by pressing both lips together. When you make the “M” sound – a Bi-labial Nasal – you can almost feel the vibration of air touching your nose.

“P” and “B” are called Bi-labial Plosives. Lips are pressed together, just as with “M”, but then an explosion of air pops from the lips – a poof, a popping to permit a brief burst of breeze. (Try rapidly to say that bi-labially rich sentence five times!)

I love it that Pentecost begins with “P”. Pentecost was a Plosive event which the disciples felt as a rushing mighty wind and then exploded into the world with the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Our text this morning was Psalm 119:29-36. I think of Psalm 119 as a Parking Lot of a chapter, large and striped off into equal sized smaller units. At 176 verses it is by far the longest chapter in the bible, longer in fact than 14 Old Testament books and 17 New Testament books. Those 176 verses are marked off into 22 equal sections of eight verses each. Why 22? Because there are 22 letters in the Hebrew Alphabet.

All eight verses of each section begin with the same letter, a successive letter of the alphabet. We have today parked in the 17th space, the Hebrew letter Pe, shown here. Pe means mouth, so it's no wonder that we read in this section words like *“with open mouth I pant,”* and *“the unfolding of your words give light.”*



Words never stay parked but are always unfolding into something other, at times beautifully, but, the human condition being what it is, at times hurtfully. May the unfolding of our words bring peace rather than conflict, reconciliation rather than division, building up rather than tearing down. Have you spoken words you wish you could take back this week? What word of apology, or of forgiveness needs to be expressed? What word of caring, of healing, of appreciation, of love do you need to speak this week? What word of encouragement?

“I would speak them, but I’m afraid I would be like Dr. Spooner, get the words wrong, all jumbled up! So I won’t think much of it. After all, they’re only words . . . mere words.”

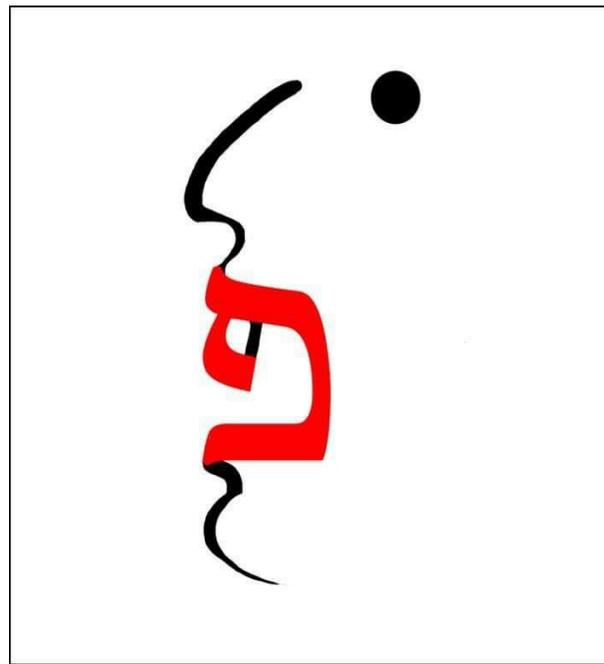
I think “*mere*” should never be an adjective paired with the word “*Word*.” Our most careful words are crafted so as not to be mere, and our most careless words are, often unfortunately, never mere, however much we wish they were. Words have consequences.

It is this recognition, the Never Mere-ness of our Words which, for a communicator, leads one to strive constantly against mediocrity, aiming first for lucidity, then for beauty of expression so that what is lucid may, at last, be memorable.

May our words this week open what is shut, leading us to action in the name of Jesus Christ. May our words and our actions glorify this week the Christ whose words taught us, and whose actions redeemed us. Amen.

***This drawing shows the pictograph idea behind the Hebrew letter “Pe” meaning “Mouth.”**

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פה “Pe”
From the word “פה” (Pe) meaning “mouth” in the way that it speaks, not eats.

