

## **“What would be different if the world was filled with gracious words?”**

A sermon shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church, Sudbury on January 24, 2016, the third Sunday of Epiphany.

Readings: Psalm 19 and Luke 4:16-21a

I have a friend who lives by an important maxim in her life. She will not say anything that she wouldn't want her grandma to hear. This knowledge helps her keep her tongue in check when she is tempted to swear, or pass along gossip, or slander someone with a quick or unthinking word. She doesn't say anything she wouldn't want her grandma to hear. Good advice.

Our focus this morning is words. The passage is from Luke, where Jesus comes home and on his visit, he is asked to lead the reading in the service. The scroll is opened to a familiar passage from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.”

When he finishes, he tells the people to pay attention, because it is all about to come true, right in front of their eyes. We are told that the people were amazed by his gracious words.

Gracious words.

What are they? I think all of us have an idea, for we have all heard them at some point in our lives. They are words of kindness and encouragement, words of praise and goodwill.

Psalm 19 gives us a clue about gracious words. They revive us, and bring wisdom. They offer joy to our hearts, and bring enlightenment to our minds. They are enduring and point us towards the right way, towards the path of God. They make us strong and give us hope.

Gracious words are an important piece when trying to cultivate a worshipful life. They are about praise and thanksgiving for the blessings which fill our lives to overflowing, the blessings that come from the Creator. The psalm speaks about the beauty of the heavens, how watching a sunset can take your breath away with the sheer glory of it all; how seeing the beauty of the trees right outside these windows, covered with snow, can move our hearts to utter a word of thanks; how hearing birdsong on a winter day can bring a note of hope into the

coldest of hearts. Gracious words invite us towards wonder, as we learn of God and grow in our understanding of holy ways.

They also help to remind us that is necessary to pause from the busyness of life, and allow goodness to flow into our being. And gracious words give us courage in the moments when we feel kicked in the gut, when our spirits are broken by pain and darkness and fear. We hear the word of hope we need when it feels like we all alone, and then someone calls and says, "You know, I was just thinking of you now, and I want to tell you how much you mean to me." Those are words that can, quite literally, save someone's life.

The ministry of Jesus was all about putting gracious words into people's mouths and teaching them how necessary it is to our living, to say thank you, to offer a word of praise, to ask for help, to show our care.

I know I have referenced this book before, but it is one of my favourites. It's a piece by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin. He writes about the hurtful words that are filling the air in the time we find ourselves living in. Words of violence and criticism, words that make neighbours suspicious of one another, and rip families, friends and countries apart. They are the words we hear and read every day in the world of politics, and economics and entertainment. They are the words spoken in coffee shops and in many homes.

Rabbi Telushkin says this atmosphere of hatred is literally, killing us. He offers an alternative view. Rather than speaking words of hurt, spreading negative stories, lies and comments, he recommends that the work of faithful people in the world is to counter all that, by speaking healing words. "What others need from us, on an ongoing basis, is to know that they are cared for, that their good deeds inspire gratitude, and that others love them. It's that simple. And words that heal and inspire must be repeated again and again."

In his view, there are four phrases we need to incorporate into our common vocabulary....

#1, Say thank you. Recognize the good others have done for you.

#2, Say, "I love you". Those who act lovingly and speak lovingly bring joy to those around them and to themselves.

#3, Ask, "How are you?" Put the emphasis on someone other than yourself.

And #4, "What do you need?", for helping another is the highest expression of love.

To his list, I have always thought there is room for a few extra words.... “I am sorry”. Apologizing means acknowledging that one has been wrong, perhaps even cruel. When we apologize, we build up and restore relationships.

Another helpful phrase is “I accept your apology, and I was wrong too”, because a conflict is never one sided. We all must shoulder some blame when a relationship goes sour.

This idea of filling the world with gracious words came home to me a couple of weeks ago. I had a night at home, so I turned on the TV, and one of my favourite movies was on. It’s called The Help. It’s the story about life in the 1950’s in Jackson, Mississippi, one of the most segregated cities in the United States at that time. It’s a movie about race, and culture, and evil. We see life in Jackson from the point of view of the help, women who gave their lives to raising white children and taking care of houses owned by white people. They were such a part of the white family’s lives, but they could not use their bathrooms, they had to get up early and leave their own children, while they took the bus to care for other children. They had to keep their opinions to themselves; they were to be seen and not heard; they were to take the most horrible abuse, because that was the way it was done. They were poor and subservient, and every day, some of the white people of Jackson tried to take their humanity away from them.

The story centres around a maid named Aibileen, who decides to tell the world the truth about life in Jackson. She is also the only bit of love in the life of the little girl she cares for. The girl’s mother does not know how to care for her child, so Aibileen does it, and she does it well. Every time the mother messes up, and shames her child, and mistreats her, and ignores her, Aibileen, takes the little one into her arms, her name is Mae Mobley, a plain, rather homely little girl compared to her beautiful mother, and Aibileen dries the little one’s tears, and hugs her with comfort, and sets her back into the world again.

All the time, as she tends this child, she whispers affirmations into her ear.

“You is kind. You is smart. You is important.”

Gracious words indeed.

That day in the temple, Jesus pointed the world to the way he would live, and he promised that he would fill the world with his own gracious words. Words like,

“You are forgiven. You are light for the world. You are a reflection of God. You are set free. You have new eyes to see. You are beloved of God. You are made for joy. You are not alone. You are my friends. I will always be with you.”

Jesus pointed us to a different way, a better way, and he invited us to fill the world with our own gracious, loving, hopeful words too. Words like, “Thank you, I love you. I forgive you. I ask you to forgive me too. ”

Words like “You is kind. You is smart. You is strong. You is talented. You is caring. You is joyful. You is wise. You is careful. You is a voice for the voiceless. You is an advocate. You is important. You is loved.”

Our calling is to push back the fear and the hate and the darkness, and allow ourselves to be the channels of the gracious love of God in the world. In small ways, in big ways, and often in the most ordinary of ways.

Mary-Jo Leddy wrote an incredible essay, where she spoke about our calling.

“I believe that I can become more grateful as I imitate Christ. There are no shortcuts. In order to understand what Jesus meant by his living, we must live as he lived, do what he did. Bless God who was his beginning, the point of his being. Create new beginnings, new ways of living and imagining the world. Give yourself away, for it will be multiplied in the giving. But most of all, believe in a world transformed by graciousness. He was happy and he was unafraid. “Live with me, as I live, he said, and you will learn what it means to be grateful.

What would be different if the world was filled with gracious words? Everything. Absolutely everything.

Resources Used:

Feasting on the Word, ed. By David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, pages 273-277 and 284-289.

Words that Hurt, Words that Heal, Joseph Telushkin, William Morrow and Company, New York, 1996. Referenced Chapter 12.

The Help, Emma Stone, 2011

Radical Gratitude, Mary Jo Leddy, Orbis Books, 2002, page 153.