

“I Desire Mercy, Not Sacrifice”

Matthew 9:9-13

Sermon notes from the pulpit of
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I've been thinking about words this week.

Last week I asked you what the most important single word is in all of scripture. You spoke right up and shared words: Love, Jesus, resurrection. Good words.

That was a trick question, of course. There is *not* single most important word in scripture, at least I don't think so. But it was and is a good exercise. Our words matter.

Every Friday, I try to share a word with you in a weekly email. If you don't get my weekly email and want to, please stay after worship for a moment, find the Friendship Pad, and write a note with your email address.) Sometime those emails are a few paragraphs that expose something of my soul to you. The songs linked to that email are anthems of the heart, for sure. More often, these emails are just a few snippets of news. In all cases, I'm hoping to remind the larger flock that Sunday is coming and I hope everyone will either tune in or show up.

To communicate love, we often use words.

I shared on Friday these words from the poet Marjorie Saiser. She captures what it feels like when we hear bad news from a loved one. In this case, the poet gets a text from her beloved with bad news, and we get to be in her heart as she scrambles to find the just the right words in response.

I've already given too much away.

Here's the poem:

Bad News Good News
By Marjorie Saiser

I was at a camp in the country,
you were home in the city,
and bad news had come to you.

You texted me as I sat
with others around a campfire.
It had been a test you and I

hadn't taken seriously,
hadn't worried about.
You texted the bad news word

cancer. I read it in that circle
around the fire. There was
singing and laughter to my right and left

and there was that word on the screen.
I tried to text back but,
as often happened in that county,

my reply would not send, so I went to higher ground.
I stood on a hill above the river and sent you
the most beautiful words I could manage,

put them together, each following each. Under
Ursa Major, Polaris, Cassiopeia, a space station flashing,
I said what had been said

many times, important times, foolish times:
those words soft-bodied humans say when the news is bad.
The *I love you* we wrap around our

need and hurl at the cosmos: Take this, you heartless
nothing and everything, take this.
I chose words to fling into the dark toward you

while the gray-robed coyote came out of hiding
and the badger wandered the unlit hill
and the lark rested herself in tall grasses;

I sent the most necessary syllables
we have, after all this time the ones we want to hear:
I said *Home*, I said *Love*, I said *Tomorrow*.

(“Bad News Good News” by Marjorie Saiser from *I Have Nothing to Say About Fire*. © The Backwaters Press, 2016.)

Words.

What’s the most important word in all of scripture? *With, service, hope*.

What’s the best word to share in a moment of celebration? *Congratulations, praise God, cheers*.

What’s the most important word to share when you find out a loved one has cancer? The poet suggests these important words: *Home, love, tomorrow*.

Words.

Words are important.

Words matter.

Jesus steps out of the words of Matthew’s gospel today warning us to beware of words. Words are thin. And words are not enough. When he says, “I desire mercy, not sacrifice,” he’s referring to the empty words and actions of worship. Sacrificing lambs and singing praises don’t matter a bit unless those action and words take share in expressions of mercy.

Jesus stands in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets who came before him. Amos had these words to say about our words (Amos 5:21-24):

21 I hate, I despise your festivals, (says the Lord)
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
22 Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them,
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.

23 Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
24 But let justice roll down like water
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

It's not that worship doesn't matter. It's not that we shouldn't pull out our harps. It's just we also must roll up our sleeves. Our words of faith and of love and our songs of praise need to find expression in action.

As a wanna-be poet and self-proclaimed wordsmith, I don't want to say that our actions matter more than our words. But I **think** that's what Jesus is saying. Actions *do*, in fact, matter more than words.

James might put it this way (and you know what I'm going to say next):
"Faith without works is dead" (James 2:26).

2:15 If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food 16 and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, **what is the good of that?** 17 So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

In a few moments, we'll share a litany, and we'll ask God that we may not be content with a secondhand faith, worshipping words. We ask God that our church be a *prod to our imaginations, a shock to our laziness, and a source of power to DO God's will.*

Words matter, but actions matter more.

* * *

Here is Matthew's gospel, Jesus calls Matthew to follow. Matthew didn't say, "Thanks for the invitation. Let me write about it in my journal." No, he got up and followed. (We might also note that, later, he took a stab at writing down the story of Jesus.)

Notice the action words. Jesus called Matthew. Matthew got up. Matthew followed. Jesus sat down at dinner. Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinner.

And just a few verses after Jesus says, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice" we find the story of Jesus raising from a girl from the dead.

A leader of the synagogue knelt before Jesus, saying my daughter is dead. But if you lay hands on her, she will live.

Jesus followed him. (Notice the verb: *followed*. So far, Jesus hasn't said a thing.) Jesus came to the leader's house. *He saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion.*

He went in. Took the girl by the hand. And she got up.

* * *

Words matter, but actions matter more. If our words of faith aren't backed up by action of mercy, what do our words even matter.

Jesus seems to be saying, *Do something, for God's sake.*

We might say, "Well, we can't cure people. We can't raise up people from the dead. We can't make that kind of difference."

Jesus might say to us, "When's the last time you tried?"

God help us.

AMEN.