

“Word Power”

What if I were to tell you that I saw a murder on the front lawn of our church property yesterday morning? You might catch on to the fact that I did not say I “witnessed a murder” and, if you know your collective nouns, you would have figured out that I was not talking about a homicide, but a gathering of crows.

Readers Digest has a regular monthly feature they title, *“It Pays to Increase Your Word Power.”* Often these are little-used words that you might never work into a conversation; but just as often this little quiz employs words that one really ought to know because they detail an item that you may need to talk about.

Have you ever found yourself speaking about something and wind up saying something like, *“That thing ... the one that you use to pry open the whatzit ... you know the thing I’m talking about ...”* Obviously the other person doesn’t know what you’re talking about because you don’t know what you’re talking about. If you were to be able to say, *“Have you ever had occasion to use a Bottom Bracket Lockring Spanner?”* you would know that you’re discussing the realm of bicycle repair and a tool that is used to remove a specific part of the chain sprocket. Imagine life in the operating room if the surgeon would say to the nurse, *“Hand me a sharp thing,”* or *“I need one of those squeezey doodads,”* or worse, said something like, *“Now what was the name of that thing I was supposed to cut out?”*

“Word Power” as Readers Digest has labeled it, is important. The English language has approximately 228,000 words currently in use (that’s according to the Oxford English Dictionary, considered by many as the definitive “last word” on matters etymological). But there are hundreds and thousands of words that enter the language annually, and many that disappear. I have enjoyed almost all of the Brother Cadfael murder mysteries, in which a twelfth-century monk solves dark crimes . . . but I am often baffled by a reference made to a tool, or one of Cadfael’s many

medicinal plants, and find myself running to the dictionary to see: what a halberd looks like, how that differs from a glaive and why Cadfael would go into his stash of dried gypsywort to treat someone who had been victimized by either of those weapons.

A few years ago, a member was reading a novel and he brought me a list of words from just a few pages that he had never encountered — I had no idea what any of them meant, either. Somehow, when you have to have a dictionary at hand to wade through the book, it takes some of the joy out of reading. Textbooks might get away with that; novelists should not so burden their readers — it's pretentious and arrogant. So sometimes it pays to increase your word power, and other times it's just not worth the effort or trouble.

There is one area where it would be really helpful to have increased vocabulary. Most of us are deficient in our catalogue of feeling words. It has been said that men have four basic feelings — angry, happy, sad, and hungry. I don't know how much that differs for women, but we are told that women do have a wider range of identifiable feelings. Except, I would challenge that assumption. My guess is that men and women have the exact same range and depth of feelings, they just articulate them differently. Which is why I think we would all benefit in our communications — as couples, in families, in our friendships and other associations, including here at church — if we were able to become more precise about our feelings and then speak of them.

For example, being angry is not the same as being perturbed, but we often call our perturbation anger. (What does it mean to be perturbed? It means to be agitated, upset, unsettled by something going on around you — oh, let's say that your husband just flicked his cigar ash onto the living room carpet for the four hundred and sixty-seventh time. Perturbed can certainly yield to anger; but they are not the same.) When I can help the other person know precisely (or at least with greater precision) how I feel, there is a better chance that we can resolve whatever difficulties may exist between us.

Word power is something that is addressed in today's lessons. As St. Paul continues to encourage the church at Ephesus toward living out the faith they have received, he tells them to ***"take up the whole armor of God,"*** the belt of truth, breastplate of righteousness, shoes [that] will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace, shield of faith, helmet of salvation, ***"and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."*** Every item listed here is defensive, protective — except that last one . . . the Word of God has power.

That power is first recognized in the creation narratives in Genesis where God speaks things into being. As a connection to that, St. John began his Gospel: ***"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."*** The identification of that "Word made flesh" is confirmed in today's Gospel as we hear Peter respond to Jesus, ***"Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."*** [He could have just as easily confessed, ***"You are the words of eternal life."***]

When God speaks, power is at work; that power is embodied in the person of Jesus, and so we come to call that book that informs us of that power and person ***"the Word of God."*** The book, as a book, as no inherent power; its message is power, the God it proclaims is power, the Christ who is revealed as resurrection, life, and truth brings power — yet the book is indeed "The Word of God."

The power of that word is conveyed to us; we bear ***"the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God."*** Many of us have kept that sword securely tucked in its scabbard. If we were to take it up, put it to use, we would begin to see the power of God go to work in those around us.

"How do we do that, Pastor?" I hear you ask. ***"How does one wield the sword of the Spirit?"*** Like any offensive weapon, you must use it selectively and with some precision. It is probably a misuse of the Word of God to stand in the intersection of Routes 14 and 43 and to scream at any and all who pass by, ***"The Lord will kill you if you don't listen to***

me!” First, the message is all wrong; second, it is like carpet bombing, there is no real target. But if your co-worker begins to talk about how unhappy she is at home, there might be something in that Word of God that could bring her comfort, hope, and maybe even direction toward a solution. I tried to be very careful with my words there, because I do not want even to *hint* that the Bible is like some kind of answer book — “*Crying co-worker: see page 753.*” Yet there is in that word power to heal, to console, to enliven, to bring hope, to still, to renew.

“But you haven’t answered the question, Pastor: ‘How does one wield the sword of the Spirit?’” First, you need to be familiar with it — strike that, most of us are “familiar” with the Word — what we need to do is follow the admonition of the ancient prayer that asks for God’s people to “*read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest*” that Word. In a companion prayer (or collect) the Church historically has asked that God’s Word “*may not be bound, but have free course and be preached to the joy and edifying of Christ’s holy people.*”

Be careful how you construe that phrase, “*Christ’s holy people*” — too often it has been taken to mean “*our own little conclave here.*” It does not mean that. Remember the Good Shepherd told us, “***I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold,***” — so the preached Word is intended for that vast mission field of the whole world. But you will not go to “the whole world” . . . you might not make it to Indiana or Pennsylvania . . . so you must let God’s Word have free course wherever you may be with whomever you may be. There may be factors that will inhibit your proclamation (a workplace prohibition, for example), but you can never be one of those inhibited factors. If you are thus immersed in God’s Word, there is a kind of bubbling-over effect that comes into play. Rejoice in it.

It is much like the stance that we hear Joshua take in today’s First Lesson: “***choose this day whom you will serve . . . but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.***” That stance does not get taken in an historical vacuum. A quick read of the book of Joshua will inform you

that Joshua's time as leader of Israel was no less fraught with struggle and difficulty than his predecessor, Moses. As it had been with Moses, the greatest struggles were often with those "stiff-necked" people of Israel. This is why, after God had led them to retake all of the Promised Land, and had divided up that land amongst the various tribes, and had ensured that each tribe had sufficient space, arable land, and natural resources in "the land flowing with milk and honey," this covenant renewal ceremony is necessary. As Normal Habel has pointed out "*Ninety percent of the time, ninety percent of the Israelites worshiped the ba'als.*" the other gods mentioned in Joshua's admonition.

It takes this kind of daily commitment to serve God and put the word power He gives us to work.

First, because we are given to laziness . . . I don't mean indolence (like the lazy grasshopper in the fable), I mean the kind of laziness that has so many other things to contend with that it requires great discipline to be attentive to this one detail. I'm asking you to focus on the Word as a priority for your life, not as something you'll "*get to when I can.*"

Second, some of those things with which we contend take on god-like status in our lives: career, family, security, to name just three. It can seem very right to let such noble endeavors rise to top position in our thinking and doing, but we dare not allow them to supplant God as the first priority.

Third, recognize that choosing to focus on God is not always an easy choice. Many followers of Jesus decided that His teachings were too difficult for them to follow, and they turned away. I don't imagine that the disciples who stayed found it any easier, they came to realize that this really was not a choice: "***Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.***" The Israelites certainly found it hard to place their trust in Yahweh. We may find that to be fantastic (as in "*I can't believe you would do that!*"), given all that they had experienced of God's deliverance and protection, but are we that much different?

It is often hard to be the person God has called you to be and to do what you know God would have you do; but that is precisely why we need the Word power at work. We can't do it! We simply cannot!

There is one last factor about this Word Power — it seems to have a catalytic effect. “*One Christian is no Christian,*” Elton Trueblood wrote, “*You cannot be Christian by yourself. We were created for community.*” There is no greater area of our communal life to which that applies than this calling to proclaim, to witness, to bring others in. I will never do it by myself (and I'm not talking about me, the Pastor, I mean me, the lone Christian); it ain't gonna happen! No one of us will be able to make full use of the power of the Word; we must work in concert — pray for each other, strengthen, encourage, build up one another. Which also suggests that we get into the powerful Word together, for study, for healing, for lifting each other up in our common task.

We may not always know the right words to say, or the precise word to define, but when we are tied into the Word of power, we have the resources we need to do what God calls us to do. We cannot float along as if something might happen someday. We are called to make something happen today — to commit ourselves to following Jesus, to standing with the household of faith, to taking up the whole armor of God, and to moving out.

We have the powerful Word and the powerful God who delivers it to us. Let's get to work using it.

Amen.