

## **"Don't Just Stand There, Speak Up"**

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Luke 4:22-24

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

February 2, 2014– 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany– Rev. Ronald Botts

If you study oratory in America you'll find William Jennings Bryan at, or near, the top of any list of great speakers. He was once asked to define eloquence and this is what he said: "[It is] the speech of one who knows what he is talking about and means what he says...."

I think its interesting that, in his definition, Bryan doesn't say anything about the mechanics of speech. He didn't suggest how much of a talk should be introduction, the emphasis to be placed on its main points, or how to build to a conclusion. He didn't mention how the speaker should stand or gesture.

What Bryan did emphasize is that the eloquent orator is one who speaks from the heart with true conviction and, because of his or her grasp of the subject, is seen as presenting it with authority. That's what makes someone effective as a speaker. That's what inspires others. That's what convinces them of your point. If, however, you have nothing to say people will know it, no matter how well you put it.

Even if conviction is key, it doesn't mean that delivery is unimportant. If you're vague about the topic, can't be understood, or extend beyond the capacity of people to listen you won't likely reach your intended goal.

Today many people can create a decent sound bite, but far fewer can stand at a podium and say something worthwhile for any length of time. I like Mark Twain's quote when he says, "Few sinners are saved after the first twenty minutes of a sermon." Which reminds us that there must also be a quality to our words as well as quantity.

And our articulation! We seem to get sloppier in our speaking all the time. Clear, coherent enunciation seem to be losing out to something that sounds like talking with your mouth full and inserting, "you know," randomly throughout. Interviews with athletes are the worst.

Still, Bryan's point is well taken. You first have something to say, and feel compelled to express it, if you're going to be regarded as an eloquent speaker. These are the men and women who inspire and move people. Winston Churchill rallied a brave, but fearful, England during WWII. And he had to do it because Adolph Hitler motivated a defeated and despondent Germany to trust their future to the National Socialist Party.

Most of us this morning would not consider ourselves to be a public speaker; yet, at times, we've all spoken convincingly before others. Perhaps our audience was only a few, or even one, but the point is still made. Think about when you proposed and, to your delight and even surprise, you were accepted. That counts. You had something to say, you knew your subject, and you said it with conviction.

Our Old Testament text for today comes from the prophet Jeremiah. He recalls how he had sensed the Lord's presence laying a charge upon him. Yet, he questioned his call because of his inexperience, his lack of training for such an important task. "Lord God, truly I do not know how to speak.' God, however, meets his protest, "You shall go to all whom I send you and speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you...."

As you read that prophetic book it is obvious that Jeremiah actually could speak and did it well. He criticizes Judah for its worship of gods other than the Lord. He implores the people to return to God. Though judgment will come, there is a greater future in store, one that is characterized by a new and more enduring relationship with God. Certainly not all changed their ways because of Jeremiah's words, but they did hear them. The message he was entrusted with was conveyed clearly and forcefully.

In our New testament reading Luke tells the story of Jesus' return to Galilee and his hometown. Having endured his temptation in the wilderness, he had no doubt that he was to speak the word of truth and carry out his mission in God's name. He was absolutely sure of his call and his words, like those of Jeremiah, were spoken with total conviction. Again, we know that not all respond to him, but—as in the case of Jeremiah—they could not have failed to hear his words.

Sometimes we're apt to forget how amazing the gift of speech really is. Except in rather rare instances, our physical ability to talk carries us throughout all of life. We have the capacity to take our thoughts and form them into words and sentences, to articulate them so that they might be heard by others. This is a great ability which other species have in only a most rudimentary and limited form.

Often, though, we fail to say out loud what we have deeply within us. There's nothing physiologically wrong with us, but we let our opportunities slip by for many reasons.

As a minister I've spent a lot of time with people who understand that their remaining days are limited. Often they want to do a recounting of the past, an inventory of what they did with this precious gift called "life." Sometimes it's also expressing the regrets that come from what they **didn't** do and all the chances that were lost. More than anything else, though, are all the words that didn't get said and especially to persons close to them. Had they been expressed, they would have conveyed love and concern and appreciation.

Back when I was in elementary school our principal was Mr. Johnson. Though he was a fair man, most of us were a bit awed of him because his role also meant that he was the school disciplinarian. Mr. Johnson doubled up and taught 6<sup>th</sup> grade and, as we had only one class in each level, we knew from the start that we would be in his room some day.

I remember him as exceedingly calm for the most part, but there was a limit to his toleration. He could be pushed only so far. When we would nudge him beyond that point, he would express himself both well and loud. Whatever you were doing wrong, you knew you better stop it right then.

One things that used to drive the man crazy was when he called on somebody and was met by awkward silence. No try at an answer, nor admission you didn't know. No sound at all. Finally, Mr. Johnson would look you straight in the eye and say, "Don't just stand there, speak up!"

Well, it's been many years since I've been in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade; still, I can continue to hear those words clearly. "Don't just stand there, speak up." Still brings a shiver down my spine! But you know, his insistence on saying something when required has stood me well over the years. Often if we just overcome our hesitancy, we find that we may already know what we need to say. We may have the right words inside, but we have to push them through our lips.

Jeremiah struggled with this, and perhaps there may even have been a time when Jesus did as well. What we see in the scriptures, however, is evidence that both men were able to move beyond their limitations. Both had a capacity which God knew all along.

We're full of words inside our head, but they don't connect with others unless we find a way to let them out. Vital things get pent up inside and long for release. Everyone has important insights and ideas worthy of being shared. Yes, there's a risk to bringing things outside and into the light, but the peril is usually less than letting them go unsaid.

What are some of the things we can convey through words? We can express love and affection. We can offer advice or describe how to do something. We can point out a danger. We can comfort a person in need. We can speak out on a societal ill. We can engage in meaningful discourse. We can seek answers to questions. We can motivate others to accomplish something good. We can tell a bedtime story to a child.

Importantly, we can witness to our faith.

Remembering that words can hurt as well as heal, build up as well as tear down, there is a selective filter we need to apply. But we can do that, and should do that. There's an inner, moral compass that helps us in this process based on what we believe and choose to live by.

Let me suggest the next time you reach a point of indecision whether to say something or not, give it all the consideration that time allows. Then if you're still undecided listen for those same compelling words that are there in the back of my head. They might be just what you need to hear at the moment.

What did you say they are? Tell us again Mr. Johnson so that we all hear.

"Don't just **stand** there, speak up!"

Friends, Mr. Johnson means it. A word to the wise.