

AUGUST 24, 2025

Marion weekly update

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

SERMON August 17 - 'Power of the Tongue' - Proverbs 18:20-21, Philippians 2:14-18, James 3:3-6

Last week we finished our series on the colors and their meanings as we explored how modern myths and storytelling invariably tie into our faith and spirituality. This week we have one more nod of the head to that sensibility.

The colors black and white also appear with white being the color of life and black the color of death. The white is the perfect balance of all the emotions and characteristics combined together. They bring fullness each having its own place. The black is the complete absence of all emotion and feeling. It can only exist by draining life from those that have it.

This also makes sense as we see how life and faith intertwine. Everything in its place, used for Godliness brings the fullest life. When we are absent our own sense of Godliness in any area that brings life, we tend to drain from other people to satisfy ourselves. One lifts up. The other tears down. Which brings us to our scriptures today. Life and death are in the power of the tongue.

Life is a term with a lot of meaning. It describes the condition of things that have breath, that actively exist, that are growing, that function. When something is productive or energetic we say it has "life". When something is impacting or inspiring we say it gives "life." Life is what we term the daily comings and goings that comprise our days. Life is a spiritual condition that is tied to how we follow Christ. In our faith we have two kinds of life, mortal and everlasting.

Naturally death and dying is the counter to these things. Interestingly we can look on the outside as if we have all of the above yet in truth be dead inside. We can have productivity and activity, seem to have energy and passion, yet it's all a show. We feel nothing. People can have all the language to appear spiritually alive, yet in truth are spiritually dead inside.

Scripture very much in Proverbs and James talk about the power that our words hold over life and death.

Let's be clear. This isn't the hocus pocus "speak and it will be done" kind of idea. Proverbs isn't talking about name it claim it, that words have superstitious power, or that I can kill with a word. Not anymore than James literally is saying that words can set things on fire.

Prayer is often words offered to God. People will claim that prayer is as good as something being done because God says our prayers will be answered. Every person that has ever prayed if they are honest will tell you this isn't true. We don't always get what we want. Our words don't guarantee any outcome whatsoever.

But they do have great power.

We see it evidenced all throughout the stories of scripture. Words that inspire war and words that inspire peace. Words of truth and words of dishonesty. Words that claim salvation that isn't present, and words that convey a heart that is saved even if the one speaking isn't entirely sure of the fullness of what's going on. Words that sow confusion and words that bring clarity.

In all of this we see kingdoms rise and fall. We see relationships between individuals thrive and destruct. We see God embraced and denied. Most of the great and terrible things begin with words.

How do we use ours?

You've heard me talk about faith that is destructive. That destructiveness is tied largely to how people use their words to persuade others within or without the faith. They are words masked as holy yet shortsighted in their impact on actual souls and people.

The reality is that much of this kind of talking isn't even fully embraced by the people speaking it. It's spoken so long as it accomplishes their purposes, but in those very personal places where things are hidden it's only truly followed where convenient.

Absolutes about God, faith, and life are confidently offered to everyone else. When they don't intersect with life exactly or become inconvenient excuses are made, loopholes found, and what's good for the goose isn't necessarily good for the gander.

The intent at the end of the day is a comfortable message to the speaker that is useful. Sadly when this is the case congruency of life and word isn't a factor. And in the story I'm going to relate the arrogance of "rightness" made for a horrible result because context of the message was ignored.

About 15 years ago some evangelists from the US went to Uganda. There was already a very conservative presence in the country that was ripe to amp up and indoctrinate further into their theology. A keystone of the

messaging was harshly anti-queer.

The result was ramping up Uganda who was already religious to extremity. The international community had to step in and there are still harsh criticisms even for how Uganda dialed back their policy. Their religious fervor drove them to institute the death penalty for anyone queer. They pulled that back to life imprisonment for practicing queer folks and up to 10 years in prison for “attempting to participate in a queer act.”

The evangelists later said “we didn’t intend that.”

Maybe they should have thought about life and death being in the power of the tongue. Context matters and saying the wrong thing in the wrong place to the wrong people can have deadly consequences just like the right thing in the right place to the right people can have life giving consequences.

Sometimes, even if we think we are correct, we need to be quiet or be VERY thoughtful and cautious about what we say.

This happens in the life of institutions. The church is a prime example. Rumors get spread. People speak out of pocket about gossip, assumptions, and half truths that are never checked out. Mouths are wide open and ears become air tight shut to anything other than what is desired to hear.

Just like this kind of behavior spelled ruin for ancient Israel, it spells disaster for churches and denominations today. The last five years of conflict in the Methodist church is a testimony to this. Lies and grumbling made rifts wider and to a breaking point.

I’ve seen the life and death power of the tongue since I’ve been here. I’ve had situations where there have been questions or issues and people have come forward directly to talk about it with faithful hearts and Christ centered minds. Good things have come of that. That’s life.

I’ve also had silence or even agreement with a smile and then the words came later as folks got together grouching and complaining. The words flew with no discernable movement to address the matter at hand. The place where words would make a difference were ignored in favor of what Philippians warns us about, “grumbling and complaining”.

The reason this is noted as being part and parcel to a “warped and crooked generation” is that this is how the economy of the world works. Do whatever I need to get my way or undermine what I don’t like. The opposite, the way of Christ, is to come together in openness and desire to please God. Work out differences and move forward stronger as brothers and sisters in faith.

Words of life are more than just sharing that Jesus died for our redemption. That’s part of it for sure! But just as important is how we speak into the lives of others and our own lives to reflect that we have indeed been redeemed.

Words of life aren’t just blanket and blind affirmations. Honest feedback and criticism offered with grace aren’t comfortable to hear many times. But those are often the words that direct us into greater and fuller lives with one another and before God.

Life giving words have the Spirit of God at their center. Interestingly life giving silence does as well. Sometimes the most life giving words we can offer are none at all.

When we speak to one another we hold fast to the command to love our neighbor as ourselves. We think about THEIR position, THEIR location, THEIR context, THEIR circumstances. Then we speak with an informed sense of not just what to offer but also HOW to offer it.

It’s about building up the other, not my own agenda.

We make sure we are speaking to the RIGHT person. Do we need guidance about what to do regarding a situation and have to ask someone uninvolved? Certainly we do at times. What we make sure of, however, is that we are speaking to the end of improving and uplifting the circumstance. Not just spreading stories or grouching for the sake of grouching.

Our words are offered with right heart. Truly right heart that is seeking the absolute best. This heart directs the tone and content of everything that comes out of our mouths. Jesus tells us that out of the heart spills the things of the mouth. That it’s what comes out of us that defiles us.

Before I speak, have I examined my own motives and condition of my heart?

This is so critical because that old toothpaste analogy is true. Once it’s out you can’t put it back in. It’s a lot harder to overcome death than it is to take life. So we build up in every way with every word.

I would like to offer just two more items even though we could exhaust this subject for days.

One of the ways to bring life in the midst of having complaint and issue with something is to ensure that when the problem is brought up a solution is offered with it. Complaining just to complain speaks death. Raising an issue with suggestions that help move forward brings life. This is in every personal and corporate relationship we have.

If we speak it, back it up with more than words. Be willing to put the muscle behind what we say. Otherwise the power doesn't resonate. It's no longer a truly good idea that I believe in. It's an idea that I want someone else to do and maybe I benefit from it.

It's why we have the expression "put up or shut up". The life of our words and their ability to be life giving has everything to do with whether or not we accompany them with personal action.

Many years ago I met with an SPRC committee and a woman talked a great game about wanting the church to be there for her children when they got older. She showed up maybe four times a year and the kids even less. What she spoke to was really wanting the comfort of the option of the church but there was nothing backing it up in any kind of action.

Our words have tremendous power. They help us garner the strength of conviction. They are the way we convey joy, peace, grace, mercy, compassion, and love in addition to our action. They are a means to inspire others to great things if they are willing to heed them. They have the power to heal, to comfort, to motivate, and so much more.

When we speak life, things move in a better direction. When our hearts are in line with those words, we move in a better direction and we do it with confidence. When our actions meet right hearts and life giving words, the possibilities are endless to thrive as individuals following Jesus and as a congregation shining His light into the world.

TOUGH QUESTIONS, HONEST ANSWERS: "Can I lose my salvation?"

This is a great question. It's also a hotly debated one. First, let's look at some of the key scriptures used to affirm either side of the argument. I'll let you read them for yourself and get the spiritual and mental juices flowing.

Passages that are used to indicate we can't lose our salvation:

John 10

27 My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all [c]; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. 30 I and the Father are one."

Romans 8

35 Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? 36 As it is written:

"For your sake we face death all day long;

we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered."[j]

37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. 38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,[k] neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Ephesians 1

13 And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation.

When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, 14 who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.

Passages used to indicate that we can lose our salvation:

Hebrews 6

4 It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, 5 who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age 6 and who have fallen[c] away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. 7 Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. 8 But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.

Hebrews 10

26 If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, 27 but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.

2 Peter 2

20 If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and are overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. 21 It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their

backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. 22 Of them the proverbs are true: “A dog returns to its vomit,”[g] and, “A sow that is washed returns to her wallowing in the mud.”

Luke 9

61 Still another said, “I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say goodbye to my family.”

62 Jesus replied, “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.”

Pastor’s Take

In my opinion, it is much more compelling that salvation can be lost. Though perhaps “lost” is a bad term. A more appropriate term might be that we can forfeit or relinquish it.

Over and over again in the Old Testament we see evidence that God’s favor can be lost. Salvation as we understand it hadn’t arrived yet. God over and over through the prophets speaks that the sacrifices and worship is useless if the heart and content of one’s life isn’t faithful. Israel as a nation continually went back and forth like a pendulum following and neglecting God.

The result scripturally was an ebb and flow of God’s favor. While God’s love always seemed to be present, God’s favor was dependent on how Israel acted and the genuineness of their faith at heart.

Salvation isn’t necessarily God’s favor. That said, I do believe it is akin to it.

We talk about salvation as a gift from God. It truly is. It isn’t earned but can be freely accepted. With this analogy, a gift can also be refused. It can even be opened for a time but never used. Salvation isn’t a one time commitment, it is a life’s journey. Like any gift we can send it back, destroy it, or choose to ignore it. Like any gift, even if we’ve taken it in the moment, to refuse it and ignore it makes it of no use and no impact for us. Is salvation any different?

The other question is what salvation actually looks like. Jesus didn’t just say go make converts. He said make disciples. Salvation and discipleship aren’t a one time confession. They are a life lived in such a way that the confession is validated and upheld.

One of the common criticism of Christianity is that the followers claim one thing but do another. Salvation is a “get out of jail(or hell) free card” to do whatever we want and still be covered for the long haul. To say that once I’ve said a prayer that is the end of it feeds right into this understanding. If we ignore the instruction of Jesus to love and be transformed, we haven’t been saved from anything.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this kind of understanding “cheap grace”. It’s grace that means nothing because it doesn’t affect anything meaningful in the life of the one claiming it. In many ways it makes a mockery of Jesus anguish and sacrifice on the cross to treat saving grace like some superficial entitlement to do whatever we please.

I do believe that grace is offered free of works. At the same time it is clear that our works define whether or not grace has truly been received. As James says, “faith without works is dead”.

If we are being truthful, we can reject Jesus at any time just as we can accept Him at any time. The Christian sensibility, especially in our modern times, is that faith and salvation are about a relationship with God through Christ. Any relationship can be cut loose and abandoned. In this case it’s never by God, but certainly it can be by us.

We say over and over again that faith is a choice that we make. Salvation is a choice. It’s important to put it in this context. It’s never about “gaining” or “losing” salvation. It’s about choosing it. Can we choose to give it up? I would imagine so. Can we choose to pick it back up again? I would imagine so.

“One and done” is a dangerous notion for many choices. It leaves no room for further information, transformation, or to take back a choice. Free will gives us the option for all of these. Why wouldn’t it extend to a relationship with God?

And in the end, that’s where I see it. Salvation isn’t just “I get forgiveness”. It’s a relationship with God that not only forgives, but is a journey of transformation through our lives. It isn’t so cheap that it’s the equivalent of punching a card that guarantees us a prize no matter what happens after that card is punched. It is a life, a devotion, a commitment to God that sustains and the leap from this life to the next isn’t far because we’ve already been doing our utmost to live into the Kingdom of God before our bodies give out.

Some say you can’t “lose” salvation because if you give it up you never had it to begin with. I think this is arrogant and judgmental in a way that I don’t have the right to judge. People can be heartfelt and genuine and then take it back. That’s the nature of people and the nature of choice. I know martial artists who at one time were phenomenal players, then later in life left it behind. It doesn’t mean that in their day they weren’t genuine and true martial arts players. It means they changed their mind later on.

Salvation is, naturally, a much grander situation. It has greater significance. In Lee Strobel’s book “The Case For Faith” he interviews many people about many questions. In one place he talks about interviewing a once great minister and man of faith that abandoned that faith later on. As the conversation draws to a close Strobel

notes that this man began to weep and softly utter “I miss Him”, remembering his time in connection to Christ. This is my encouragement to you. If you have that relationship and it has been life giving, don’t let it go. Life might get hard, even impossible. Don’t let it go. The very heart of faith is that God is with us no matter what. The heart of community is that loving God and one another we don’t abandon each other when life gets hard. We stick together and carry one another in our ups and downs. This is one of those questions where I’d love to continue to hear what you think. Can someone “lose” salvation? And why do you believe the way you do?