March 16, 2014 Norwalk

2nd in a series on Take Time to be Holy

**Pastoral Prayer**

When we are feeling self-satisfied, O God, remind us that we are incomplete. When we are feeling like we pretty much know it all -- at least on one given subject if not everything -- remind us how much more there is to learn. When we are feeling like we have pretty much tried everything -- as parents, as spouses, as diplomats, as neighbors -- and nothing much seems to work, remind us how often you must have felt the same way with us, and yet still you move your lips and pronounce a creating Word and life is somehow made new.

So help us to continue to reach, continue to risk new love, continue to offer forgiveness and extend grace and spur the imagination for that “something more” that you have already conceived. Help us take time to be holy, to open our arms to happiness, and to learn; and in the learning, to comprehend afresh that we’re not finished yet -- as a world, as a people, as persons, as a church. Indeed, regardless of our age, we are only getting started; and like open-beaked hatchlings in the nest, we are hungry for more. Feed us, we pray, on your living Word. For we pray in Jesus’ name, as he taught us: Our father…

**Psalm 1**

 Happy are those

 who do not follow the advice of the wicked,

or take the path that sinners tread,

 or sit in the seat of scoffers;

but their delight is in the law of the Lord,

 and on his law they meditate day and night.

They are like trees

 planted by streams of water,

which yield their fruit in its season,

 and their leaves do not wither.

In all that they do, they prosper.

The wicked are not so,

 but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgement,

 nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,

 but the way of the wicked will perish.

 **Psalm 119:105**

Your word is a lamp to my feet

 and a light to my path.

***Taking the Time for Learning***

######  I have confessed this before, I believe, but as I do so again I will say in my own defense that I had long since fallen out of the rhythm of dating. And I was clumsily out of practice in the fine art of “first dates”. I think of that as some consolation when I recall the conversation on that first date with the woman who would surprisingly become my wife, when in that tentative, careful dance of getting acquainted through the exchange of likes and dislikes, I blurted out “I love words.” It's certainly true. I do love words – those conversational paints and brushes through which people add color and texture to their thoughts. I love the way that words can be joined together in new and sometimes delightfully awkward combinations that cast ideas or feelings or imaginations in entirely new light. I do love words. It's just not the sort of thing that most people think to admit on a first date.

 I suppose that's partly because it sounds a little geeky. We have been trained to admire the sweaty, thick-muscled, testosterone charged tough guys, not the pale, bookish wordsmiths. Think, for example, of that classic tale of Cyrano de Bergerac, the brilliant but facially grotesque French poet who finds himself deeply in love with his beautiful, intellectual cousin Roxane. Roxane, of course, is inconveniently in love with a young nobleman named Christian, who though handsome, is utterly incompetent when it comes to sharing his thoughts. So it is that through a convoluted series of turns, Cyrano volunteers to ghostwrite love letters – writing the poetry at which he is gifted, while signing Christian's name.

 And it works! At one point Roxane confides in Cyrano that she thinks Christian is the most ravishing poet in the world. Cyrano’s disguised letters have moved her inexpressibly. In one classic scene, Cyrano stands Christian in front of Roxane’s balcony so that he can speak to her while Cyrano stands under the balcony whispering to Christian what to say.

 Eventually – and much to the heartache of Cyrano -- Roxane and Christian secretly marry. But as is so typical in such stories, it all ends badly. Christian is ultimately shot; Cyrano falls out of a window and is mortally injured; and Roxane lives out her days in a convent, bereft of the man she loved to look at, and also the man she loved to listen to. Alas. [1].

 But even with all that, words don't finally enjoy a very positive reputation. “Sticks and stones,” we've grown up sing-songing, “can break my bones, but ***words*** can never hurt me.” “Talk,” it is commonly believed, “is cheap.” Think of all the reticence and suspended judgment of political seasons. We hear all these speeches, but distrust ***mere*** rhetoric. It's only words. As an electorate, we find ourselves echoing Eliza Doolittle, of *My Fair Lady* fame, spewing exasperation to Henry Higgins,

*Words! Words! Words! I'm so sick of words!*

*I get words all day through;*

*First from him, now from you!*

*Is that all you blighters can do?*

*Don't talk of June, Don't talk of fall!*

*Don't talk at all! Show me!*

*Never do I ever want to hear another word.*

*There isn't one I haven't heard.*

*Please don't explain, Show me! Show me!*

*Show me now!* ***[2]***

 But I am not altogether alone. Words do have some troubadours and defenders. In the closing, almost anthem-like song that climaxes the Tony Award winning musical *Ragtime*, which explores the turn of the 20th century struggles for racial and social and economic justice, the defiant singer urges his listeners to:

 *Go out and tell the story to your daughters and your sons.*

*Make them hear you.*

*And tell them, in our struggle, we were not the only ones.*

*Make them hear you.*

*Your sword can be a sermon or the power of the pen.*

*Teach every child to raise his voice and then, my brothers,*

*then will justice be demanded by ten million righteous men.*

*Make them hear you.* ***[3]***

The power of words to bring about change.

 Or to elicit beauty. Perhaps you remember that riveting scene in the movie, *The Dead Poet Society,* when the new English teacher at a conservative boys school in Vermont, John Keating, played by actor Robin Williams, began his poetry class one day by calling his students' attention to the dry prose of the introduction in their textbook. Read glumly and dispassionately by one of the students, the words themselves seem flat and tasteless. Suddenly, Keating bursts out, “Excrement! That's what I think of James Evans Pritchard, PhD's introduction to poetry. We are not laying pipe. We are understanding *poetry*. I want you to rip it out. And while you are at it, rip out the whole introduction. Just rip it out.”

 The students aren't sure how literally to take their teacher, but when it becomes obvious that he is serious, they begin tearing out the pages from their hardcover texts. “This is a battle – a war!” Keating announces to his class. “And the casualties could be your hearts, and souls. Armies of academics going forth, measuring poetry. But this will not happen in ***my*** class! You will learn to savor words, and language.”

 Savoring words, and language. That, I think begins to sound like the hymn writer in the old, old song that is guiding our spiritual discipline throughout this Lenten season. If you missed the first installment of the series last week you can catch up by reading it online at the church's website.

*Take time to be holy, speak oft with thy Lord;*

*Abide in Him always, and feed on His Word.*

 If words now seem too ephemeral for food; too airy, for the most part, to offer much nourishment – high in calorie, low in substance; fluffy and carrying little weight – know that it hasn't always been the case; and still isn't, at certain times, with us. “We'd like to offer you the position.” “The biopsy report shows some evidence the disease has spread.” “I'm proud of you.” “I'm pregnant.” “I now pronounce you...” ***Mere*** words? Hardly.

And if Eliza Doolittle had had her fill of words and longed for something more, Tevya, that other Broadway icon in “*Fiddler on the Roof”*, longed to hear at least three of them. Yes, he agreed when he broached the question to his wife Golde, she had shown her love for him in countless ways throughout the years of their marriage – cooking and cleaning and bearing him children. But what he wanted to hear – couldn't bear NOT to hear – were three simple words: “I love you.” “Do you love me,” he musically asked.

 “Words,” Lutheran pastor Peter Marty once observed, “are the medium of human relationship. They are how we make a world, and how we fashion a life.” [4]

 And, we are taught, how God fashioned a world. “Let there be light,” God commanded; and with the word it was done. “Let there be dry land,” he ***SAID***; and it was so. “Let there be plants and animals and fish and birds, let there be men and women,” the words rang out, and it was not only so, it was good. Powerfully, creatively, good.

 And according to the unfolding story, it was that same powerful and creative Word that became flesh and dwelt among us – piercing the darkness with light, to be sure, but exploding the silence, as well, with truth.

 Perhaps it isn't so surprising, after all, that Matthew would record Jesus offering a blessing on those “who hunger and thirst after righteousness,” for hadn't Jesus already made plain in the temptation story that food, as we conventionally think of it, isn't enough to keep a person alive? We thrive, Jesus quoted Moses, by feeding on “every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matthew 5:6, Deuteronomy 8:3)

 As if to dramatize the idea as graphically as possible, God said to the prophet Ezekiel, "'Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the house of Israel.' So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat...and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth” (3:1-3)

 *“Take time to be holy. Feed on his word.”*

 But if that sounds unpleasantly literal, understand that the hymn writer – as well as the prophet – was speaking metaphorically. “Sate yourself,” they are saying, “with the Word of God.” But be careful to hear in that the difference between Word and words. This isn't just a matter of thumbing through the pages of a printed book, reading and memorizing as many as your brain can hold – although that wouldn't be a bad place to start. It's just that the Word of God is larger than the words on the page – even if the page is from the Bible. The words of Moses and the prophets, the words of Matthew and Mark and Luke and John and Paul and all the others represent the best efforts of those attentive and faithful witnesses to get down on paper the Word, the mind, the inspiration of God's holy intent. Like listening to a masterful symphony orchestra performing a masterwork of music through small and tinny speakers, we must somehow listen beyond the tangible, woefully inadequate medium to hear and appreciate and comprehend the glory they are, with all their limitations, trying to convey.

 Hungry in so many and deep ways, we must take time to learn what God would have us do, toward what God would have us reach.

 If, as the Psalmist suggests, the Word of God is like a lamp to our feet and a light to our path, it is likewise our very food. Like trees planted near the stream, he sings in the very first Psalm, whose roots drink in the water, enabling their living to be so vital that they remain healthy and supple; their fruit is plentiful and sweet, so it is for those who consume the word of the Lord. They prosper, he observes, in all they do.

 Let us, in the pursuit of healthy and enlivening holiness, take the time to learn by feeding on...

 ...by hungering and thirsting for...

 ...by taking into ourselves...

 ...instead of all the spiritual junk food available...

 ...the very Word of God.

 ...taking the time to learn.

[1] Phillips, Brian and Sitar, James. *SparkNote on Cyrano de Bergerac*. 15 Feb. 2008 <http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/cyrano/>.

[2] Words by Alan Jay Lerner, Music by Frederick Loewe

[3] “Make them Hear You,” Music by Stephen Flaherty, Lyrics by Lynn Ahrens. 1998

[4] *Grace Matters*, January 4, 2008