

October 14, 2018
Isaiah 55:10-12
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“Sticks and Stones and PB&J”

Good morning. This morning we are talking about PB&J. As our Worship Team -- and Outreach Team and probably pretty much anybody who's been around Creekside for any length of time knows, this is a favorite topic of mine. Ever since Sue Noffsinger came up with PB&J as Praise, Blessing and Joy we've been serving it up in all kinds of ways at different times of the year. Thank you to all of you who have contributed peanut butter and jelly for Church Community Services -- we'll see that it get taken in to their food pantry in the coming week. This is literally a way to share PB&J with our neighbors.

Sometimes our PB&J has focused on spreading it wide, but I think it's also important to remember to lay it on thick. I want to remind us of some of things the Bible says about PB&J and what that means for how we interact with one another. Let me ask you first about a verse which is NOT in the Bible. I'll say the first line, and see if you can complete the second line:

Sticks and stones may break my bones,
But words will never hurt me.

It's a good thing that isn't in the Bible, because it's rubbish. It just isn't true. Most of us are past the point -- if we were ever there -- of punching each other when we disagree. I hope none of you have ever swung a stick or thrown a rock at another person with the intent to harm them. If you have, I hope your aim was poor, because sticks and stones can cause serious injuries. But words can also hurt -- a lot. Words can belittle and shame, they can destroy reputations, they can end marriages and damage relationships beyond repair. Words can make us feel unsafe and unacceptable, whether they are spoken,

written, emailed, texted, tweeted, broadcast, whispered, or posted on Facebook. The book of James has some pretty strong words about words: “How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature and is itself set on fire by hell.” (James 3:5b-6) Those are some fiery words. Maybe we’d be better off just not saying anything.

That is an ironic thing for a preacher to say. I speak -- all the time, or at least almost all of the time -- with the conviction that I have something to say which other people ought to hear. But I also believe everything I just said about how destructive words can be, so I try to speak and write and communicate with care and compassion, because I know that words are powerful, and I know that people often remember words which were hurtful, and forget words of support and encouragement. Of course, our words are not God’s words. God’s words have a particular kind of power, and the ones which we remember together are mostly recorded in the book which we call the Bible, or the word of God.

God’s word begins with God’s words. You remember in Genesis, when God created the heavens and the earth, and the earth was a formless void covered by darkness and a wind from God swept over it and God said “Let there be light.” And what happened? There was light. This is significantly different than sitting in a dark room and waiting until your husband comes in and calling out, “Hey Honey, could you turn on the light?” Light was actually *created* through the words of God. There’s a term for words with this kind of power; it’s called performative speech. It’s fairly rare in the human realm: usually only folks with special roles at ceremonial occasions use performative speech -- such as when a pastor or priest says during a wedding ceremony, “I now pronounce you husband and wife.” That pastor or priest has that power because the couple has granted it by asking him or her to perform the wedding. In other words, even though I’m a pastor, I can’t walk up to a random man and woman on the street and say, “I now pronounce you husband and wife” and have that accomplish anything except confusion.

Isaiah 55:10-11 is a beautiful example of the performative speech of God. Let me read those verses for you again, “For as the rain and the

snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” And here, I believe, is an opportunity to deepen our experience of praise, blessing, and joy. Praise doesn’t happen because someone tells us what to do it, or makes us feel like we ought to do it. Praise happens when we are aware of the power and glory of God, or when we realize the enormity of Jesus love and sacrifice. Praise happens when we are aware of God’s Spirit moving among us or moving within us. It’s great when people who have musical skills or speaking skills or songwriting skills use those gifts to praise God, but praise is an attitude which anyone can practice and cultivate. It begins with an awareness of God’s power and presence.

Let me give you a simple example. Isaiah talks about the rain and snow which come from heaven to water the earth. Not all of us are anticipating the prospect of snow on its way in the coming weeks and months. But if you are a farmer, you know that without rain and snow, crops would wither and die, there would be no grain and no bread and people would be hungry. It might not keep you from grumbling about scraping off your windshield, but an awareness of God’s purpose can change our attitude about the world around us. Part of the awareness is that there is a whole world and my interests are just a tiny part of it. Praise should not happen only when something really good has happened to me personally (Praise God for finding me that parking place!); praise should be happening wherever we witness the activity of God. And God is at work everywhere.

Blessing is something we receive from God, but sharing blessing is also a formational practice. It may be one of the few opportunities most of us have for performative speech. If I say, “God bless you,” I have actually *created* that blessing. You may receive it or ignore it, but you have been blessed, whether you accept it or not. I used to say, “God bless you” as part of my recording on our automated Phone Tree, and I neglected to do so for a week or so. Someone told me that she missed those words, and that it had been her practice to say, “God bless you, too” to the recording. I have tried to include it

ever since, and have said it with gratitude because I remember I am blessed in return.

The blessing of blessing may be more for the giver than the receiver. If you are withholding your blessing because no one has blessed you lately, you need to go back to praise and remember that God is at work everywhere. Blessing is a response of gratitude and generosity when we realize that there is more than enough of God's goodness to go around. In fact, the more we give God's blessing to others, the more blessing there will be; not only for us, but for everyone. Listen to these words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount, "I say, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven." Blessing anyone -- but especially your enemies -- is transformative. It is possible to bless someone and not agree with them; it is not possible to bless someone and wish them ill at the same time: Let me say that again: it is not possible to bless someone and wish them ill at the same time. If Christians would actually practice blessing one another, I believe it would change the tone of Board meetings, denominational gatherings and national conversations. If we as Christians are too stubborn to follow the words of Jesus and pray for our enemies, I don't think we should be indignant when politicians can't be civil to one another. Sharing blessing -- *especially* with our enemies -- is one of the hallmarks of being a child of god.

I believe joy is a natural outgrowth of praise and blessing. If praise is awareness and attitude and blessing is gratitude and generosity, than joy is resilience and hope. Isaiah 55 puts joy right next to God's purpose. As soon as God's word succeeds in its purpose, we go out with joy, and all of creation is singing and clapping along with us. Joy is the conviction that God's purpose will be accomplished, and that is cause for celebration. Maybe that celebration is for what will be or what is becoming rather than what is now--that's what we celebrate all the time: the beginning of a marriage, the birth of a baby, a graduation from high school and entry into college or work. We don't celebrate because we know what lies ahead, we celebrate the potential that's there; we are affirming the promise of the future. As Christians, we believe that God is a part of our future as well as our present. Joy gives us the resilience to pick up and keep going today because we have hope for where God will lead us tomorrow.

I should tell you that I tried hard to come up with another snappy acronym for PB&J: Awareness, Gratitude and Hope. AGH. It turns out that I don't have Sue's gift. I'm also happy to stick with PB&J -- that creamy richness and sweetness which God gives us and we are called to share with other people. So I will leave you with just a few more words today; which I hope will give you blessing and joy:

**Sticks and stones may fracture bones,
But words can wound us deeply.
When we spread blessing, praise and joy
Our God can heal completely.**