

October 9, 2016, 21st Sunday after Pentecost

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Focus: The word of God breaks chains.

Today, in our Small Catechism group, we discussed Luther's explanation of the Ten Commandments. My favorite is his explanation of the 8th: "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." What does this mean?

Luther answers, "We are to fear and love God, so that we do not tell lies about our neighbors, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations. Instead we are to come to their defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light."

As we read through this, I couldn't help but think of what I'll be watching on TV tonight: the 2nd presidential debate. We don't know what will be said. But I think we can guess that Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump will not be spending a lot of time coming to one another's defense, speaking well of each other, and interpreting everything the other does in the best possible light.

But I'll also say this: I think we can guess that most of us writing on Facebook or talking with friends about the candidates will probably not use good 8th commandment skills either. We also will probably have terrible things to say about at least one of the candidates, if not both. Clearly we need to discuss issues, candidates, and their words openly, but what I see and hear and all too often say myself are words that attack, speak poorly, and interpret everything in the worst possible light. If the past year has proven anything beyond a doubt, it's that we are not a nation that does a good job of following the 8th commandment.

This is a problem. Today's second lesson is from a letter addressed to one of Paul's traveling companions Timothy. But it really speaks to all of us. In this letter, we are warned "to avoid wrangling over words." Now for me, "wrangling over words," is maybe not a phrase that I use every day, so I looked at the original text, and this phrase: "wrangling over words" is actually just one word in Greek: *logomaxein*. It literally means "to word-fight." Well, as soon as I read that, I knew exactly what was meant. Because I "word-fight" all the time.

The authors of the Bible knew something that is important for us to remember. Words are powerful. In Genesis, God creates the entire universe with words. "Let there be light." Moses leads the people of Israel from bondage in Egypt into freedom with the words, "Let my people go." God raises up prophets who speak words of truth to people in power, prophets like Isaiah, who say, "My word will not return to me empty, but will accomplish that which I purpose for it." In the New Testament, Paul writes, "Faith comes through hearing, and what is heard comes from the word of God." And, as we read earlier this week in our first confirmation class, the Gospel of John calls Jesus the Word of God who becomes flesh and dwells among us.

Words are powerful. And God wants us to use them for good. But the problem with us is we don't always do that. We sin with our words. Too often we live by the phrase, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." You can search long and hard in your Bible, but you will never find that phrase. The authors knew well that words that had the

potential to bring creation into existence, to preach the Gospel, and to set slaves free also had plenty of power to do a lot of hurt.

St. Paul knew that firsthand. He knew the power of words to bind people, to put them in chains. In 2 Timothy, we hear that it was words—the proclamation of his Gospel—that led him to suffer hardship even to the point of being chained like a criminal, to being imprisoned. But was it the words of his Gospel that led to his chains? Or was it the people who used their own words to spread lies about him? Was he imprisoned for the words of the Gospel? Or was he imprisoned because of the words of those in power: princes, judges, and local authorities, who with a word could set someone free or send him to jail? Paul knew all too well that words could be used to proclaim the Gospel or to put someone in chains.

All of us feel the chains of words at sometime or another. If you stay long enough around a place, whether it's your family, workplace, or even your congregation, you are going to feel the chains of words. Maybe it's a big overheated argument, or maybe it's the nagging of petty criticism, passive-aggressive snide comments, or the thoughtless or selfish remark. Often it's the people we care about the most: the people we love or respect the most, whose words hurt us the most. Words that make us feel defensive or ashamed or inadequate. Words that as 2 Timothy says, "ruin the hearers." When that happens, we can feel chains: chains of estrangement and alienation from the person saying the words or chains of fear or guilt that bind us up and don't let us live in the loving relationships God calls us to. I am sure all of us here can remember times when someone else's words have been like a suffocating chain coiled all around us.

I also know that the chains of words can ruin not only the hearer, but the one who says them. Because we've also all been there. We've all been the one who says the mean comment, who clicks send on the e-mail or the text message before they've had a chance to think things over and calm down. Or, if you're like me, just can't resist getting in the snarky last word in an argument with your brother or sister or your husband or wife or your friend. You don't get those words back. The chains of words have tied down one relationship after another. There is a long chain of word-fighting in our human history. From 2016 presidential campaigns all the way back to Adam and Eve jostling their jaws over whose fault the apple was.

But the word of God is not chained. The word of God is a word of truth. The word of God doesn't tell lies about our neighbors or slander them. The word of God doesn't seek to pass the blame. And it doesn't ruin the hearers.

But the word of God confronts us where we are. It shows us our chains. It shows us the chains that others' words have put on us and tells us not to be ashamed. It shows us the chains that our words have put on others, and it calls us to a higher standard. And it shows the chains of guilt for our own words and announces forgiveness. We live in a world captive to sin, a world that cannot free ourselves, a world in chains.

But the word of God is not chained. The word of God comes into our world. The word of God comes into our world and baptizes "You are my beloved child." The word of God comes into our world and preaches, "love your neighbor as yourself." The word of God heals, "Your faith

has made you well.” And bit by bit, those links in the long chain of the words of sin and death weaken. And the word of God breaks chains and sets us free.

Free to rightly explain the word of truth: the word of truth that calls to repentance and forgives. Free to suffer hardship knowing that the goodness of God and the salvation of Jesus Christ have the final word. Free even to endure everything for the promise of eternal glory because the saying of God’s word is sure.

If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him.

Dying with Jesus Christ means dying with the one whose words never cut down, but only build up. It means dying with the one who never allowed argument or word-fights to close the book on someone, but constantly sought to bring them back to himself. It means dying with the one who prayed for the forgiveness of those whose words led him as an innocent man to be condemned as a criminal on the cross.

But it also means that we live and reign with him. To live and reign with Jesus is to be redeemed and renewed for the sake of the world. And when that happens, it’s God’s word that reigns over our words. We become prophets speaking a word of truth and love to the people who most need to hear it. God’s word speaks through us breaking the chains of suffering with a word of healing. God’s word speaks through us breaking the chains of exploitation with a word of justice. God’s word speaks through us breaking the chains of hatred with a word of love. God’s word speaks through us breaking the chains of judgment with a word of mercy. God’s word speaks through us breaking the chains of guilt with a word of forgiveness. And God’s word speaks through us breaking the chains of alienation with a word of reconciliation.

No matter how many words we’ve said that we can’t take back, God’s word is always capable of redeeming and renewing our words. The words that spoke creation billions of years ago can still speak a new creation. In a world of word-fighting, God’s word makes peace.

Above all the false witnesses in today’s world—and there are many—we are called to bear true witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And when we do that, the word of God still breaks chains and sets us free to follow where our Savior leads us. **Amen.**