

# Sticks and Stones

## November 20, 2016

### Colossians 1:11-20

We've all heard it. We've all said it. "Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me." And we all know it's not true. Neuroscience has shown that the brain receptors for physical and emotional pain are one and the same. **Words can hurt or heal. Words have power.**

Today is Christ the King Sunday. The issue is power.

On that first Good Friday, Pilate had the power. He could execute this inconvenient imposter. Everyone knew it. Power over death means power over life.

There was a dissenting voice. "*Jesus, remember me,*" pleads the dying desperado, "*when you come into your kingdom.*"

He saw what few others did. Power over life means power over death. "*Today,*" Jesus promises him, "*today you will be with me in Paradise.*"

Who has the power? Jesus, the Crucified and Risen Lord. He turns power inside out and upside down. He inaugurates a new order governed not by fear, force and judgment but by love, mercy and grace. Jesus is the King, reigning from his unlikely throne. He is the king the grave cannot contain.

Paul writes these words in Colossians one: Jesus "*is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.*"

Jesus showers that power on his body, the Church. Paul's words are nothing short of astonishing here: "*May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has enabled you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light.*"

What do we do with that power? We love our neighbors as ourselves. And we do that in specific and concrete ways.

Today we read the eighth commandment. "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." What is this? "We are to fear and love God," Luther writes, "so that we do not tell lies about our neighbor, betray or slander them, or destroy their reputations."

**Words can hurt or heal. Words have power.**

The commandments are cumulative. Each one builds on the preceding commandments. Bearing false witness kills our neighbor's reputation. Bearing false witness steals our neighbor's honor. "God will not have our neighbor deprived of his reputation, honor, and character," Luther writes in the *Large Catechism*, "any more than of his money and possessions..."<sup>1</sup>

Words have the power to kill or to heal. We are called to exercise great care with that power. Words can quickly escape our control.

There is an old story of a person who repeated a rumor about a neighbor. Later, the gossip discovered that the rumor was untrue. He went to an elder in the community to learn how to make things right. “Go to your home and take a feather pillow outside,” the elder told him, “Rip it open and scatter the feathers, then return to me tomorrow.”

The following day, the gossip returned. The elder said, “Bring all those feathers back to me.” The gossip searched for the feathers, but the wind had carried them all away. “You see,” said the elder, “it’s easy to scatter the feathers but impossible to get them back.”

It’s easy to spread hurtful words. It’s impossible to completely undo the damage. That’s the negative part of the commandment. Gossip has to go.

**Words can hurt or heal. Words have power.**

But that’s not the last word. When we eliminate a bad habit, we need to substitute a good one. That’s why the meanings of the commandments have positive conclusions. “Instead,” Luther continues, “we are to come to [our neighbors’] defense, speak well of them, and interpret everything they do in the best possible light.”

Alice Roosevelt Longworth once said, “If you haven’t got anything nice to say about anybody come sit next to me.” Today the killing power of words is multiplied a thousand fold by electronic media. Gossip and innuendo create false intimacy, make us feel superior to others, damage enemies and control dissent.

**Words can hurt or heal. Words have power.**

What do we do with the power? We turn negative the conversation back to the gossip. We discuss ideas and tasks rather than people. We withdraw from negative conversations when nothing else works.

What do we do with the power? We stand with the victims of gossip. We confront the culture of bullying in our schools, our workplaces, our communities and our society. We train ourselves and our young people to resist the killing power of words in their lives. When I say “killing power” I mean it. One of the horrific outcomes of our verbal culture is a dramatic increase in suicide among teens and young adults.

And we speak out loud the truth of God’s love in Jesus. God “*has rescued us from the power of darkness,*” Paul writes in Colossians one, “*and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*” Those are words with real power. Let’s use them often!

Let’s pray...

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<sup>i</sup> Tappert, *Large Catechism*, paragraph 256.