

“Acceptable Words”

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer.”

Throughout my life, I have been blessed by people who have served as teachers, mentors, and role models, giving of themselves in helping me grow both as a person and as a pastor. High on the list of these influential persons was Pastor Ken Ensminger, who served many years as pastor of Jerusalem Lutheran Church in Schwenksville, Pennsylvania. I had first attended worship at Jerusalem due to the persistence of a classmate at university who didn’t want to go to church alone, but once I was there I found a congregation that became my church home during my four years at Ursinus. Not only did I find a warm welcome from the people of the congregation, but I was also invited to get involved in the congregation’s life by teaching Sunday School, singing in the church choir, and reading the lessons in Sunday worship. The congregation became such an important part of my life that I even got up early on Sunday mornings to attend worship, at a time when getting up early was as enjoyable to me as brussels sprouts!

From the beginning of my worshiping at Jerusalem, I became enthralled by Pastor Ken’s preaching. He had a dynamic style of preaching that was quite different from what I had experienced in my home church. His sermons were biblically based and always related the text to what was happening in the congregation and the world and would often be in sync with what I was learning in school. One part of Pastor Ken’s preaching that always impressed me was the way he began every sermon with the prayer *“let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer.”* Many preachers have a phrase that they use at the beginning of their sermons (for many years, I have used the apostolic greeting *“grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ”*) but I always found Pastor Ken’s greeting most significant, since as a preacher he was praying that the words of his sermon might be acceptable in the sight of the Lord who word he was proclaiming. As I began to meet with Pastor Ken while I was discerning my call to enter seminary, I asked him why he chose to use this introduction to his sermons. He shared with me that it was the prayer his home pastor always used, words that we hear at the end of today’s Psalm reading. “It’s a reminder to me,” Pastor Ken shared, “that preaching is never about me or my own words, but the Word of God that I have been called to proclaim from this pulpit.”

This memory of Pastor Ken’s preaching and his mentorship which still influences my work as a pastor came back this week as I saw that Psalm 19 is one of our readings for this first Sunday in October. Psalm 19 is one of the most influential of all the songs of the Hebrew Scriptures. C.S. Lewis referred to it as *“the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world,”* and it has been the influence for songs as diverse as the beloved hymn “How Great Thou Art” and “The Heavens Are Telling” from Franz Joseph Haydn’s *The Creation*. The psalm calls upon the people of Israel to praise God for both the gift of creation and the blessing of *Torah*, God’s “law” or “instruction.” All creation testifies to the glory of God: *“The heavens declare the glory of God,*

and the sky proclaims its maker's handiwork." (19:1). The universe itself instructs humanity about God's rule. No corner of the cosmos is unreached; the "words" of day and night reach "*to the ends of the world*" (19:3), and the course of the sun "*goes forth from the uttermost edge of the heavens and runs around to the end of it again; nothing is hidden from its burning heat*" (19:6). When the people of God "*consider all thy hands hath made ... then sings my soul, my Saviour God to thee, how great thou art!*" (Carl G. Boberg, ELW Hymn 856).

As the created order has proclaimed God's sovereignty, it is the privilege and the responsibility of the Sovereign God to provide life-sustaining guidance and instruction for God's people. God's Torah is built into the very structure of the universe, and life depends on the Torah as much as it depends on the daily rising of the sun:

- "The teaching of the LORD is perfect and revives the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure and gives wisdom to the simple. The statutes of the LORD are just and rejoice the heart; the commandment of the LORD is clear and gives light to the eyes." – 19:7-8.

God's Torah accomplishes what God intends for human life: wisdom, joy, and enlightenment ("*For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.*" – Psalm 36:9). The "fear of the "LORD" describes the human response of conformity to God's Word (the basis for Luther's refrain in the *Small Catechism* that "*we are to fear and love God*"). Living by God's Word makes one pure, life as God intends it: "*The fear of the LORD is clean and endures forever; the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.*" (19:9). Neither wealth nor richest food can make life possible the way God's instruction does; the Word of God is "*more to be desired ... than gold, more than much fine gold, sweeter far than honey, than honey in the comb.*" (19:10). Through the blessings of Torah that God has bestowed upon God's people, "*God has spoken a personal word to humanity that enables the human creature to live in harmony with God and with the whole creation.*" (J. Clinton McCann Jr.).

But even though God "*has told you, O mortal, what is good*" (Micah 6:8), even God's personal instruction is not sufficient to ensure that human behavior will be in harmony with God and with God's ordering of the world. While the psalmist acknowledges that by God's Torah "*is your servant enlightened, and in keeping them there is great reward*" (19:11), the author also acknowledges that inevitably there will be "offenses" and "secret faults," and therefore those who join their voices in this psalm pray for forgiveness so that God might "*cleanse me from my secret faults [and] keep me from presumptuous sins; let them not get dominion over me*" (19:12b-13). As the result of God's grace, the psalmist will be "*whole and sound, and innocent of a great offense*" (19:13b). One who is "innocent/blameless" does not mean that a person is sinless but lives in dependence upon God. This dependence upon God for forgiveness and for life itself is the basis for the closing prayer of the psalm, in which the psalmist prays that "*the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer*" (19:14). By the grace of God, the psalmist's words are in harmony with the "speech" of the cosmos, in which "*one day tells its tale to another, and one night imparts knowledge to another*" (19:2). In praying that one's words might be "acceptable," the psalmist is using a word which in other contexts designates a worthy sacrifice:

- “It shall be on Aaron’s forehead, and Aaron shall take on himself any guilt incurred in the holy offering that the Israelites consecrate as their sacred donations; it shall always be on his forehead, in order that they may find favour before the LORD.” – Exodus 28:38.
- “... to be acceptable in your behalf it shall be a male without blemish, of the cattle or the sheep or the goats. You shall not offer anything that has a blemish, for it will not be acceptable on your behalf.” – Leviticus 22:19-20.

This prayer at the conclusion of the psalm suggests that the kind of sacrifice God ultimately desires consists of human lives that are lived in humble dependence upon God (“*The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.*” – Psalm 51:17). The psalmist’s address of God as “my rock” reinforces this conclusion; our strength is from the Lord (“*The LORD is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer, my God, my rock in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.*” – Psalm 18:2). The address of God as “my redeemer” suggests that this strength is experienced very personally. The term “redeemer” derives from family relationships, where it was the responsibility of family members to buy back, or “redeem,” relatives who had fallen into slavery (“... *their uncle or their uncle’s son may redeem them, or anyone of their family who is of their own flesh may redeem them; or if they prosper they may redeem themselves.*” – Leviticus 25:49). Thus “redeemer” connotes intimacy, one who is known and experienced as “next of kin” (Ruth 4:1). “*The God who set the sun on its course is the same God the psalmist has experienced personally as ‘my next of kin’!*” (McCann).

One who has experienced the wonders of creation and the blessing of God’s Word which “*is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path*” (Psalm 119:105) desires that every word that is spoken and every thought upon which one meditates might be “acceptable” to the God who has created us, who has redeemed us, and who abides with us always. One whose soul sings “*how great thou art*” also desires to respond to God’s abundant blessings both in creation and in the Word by affirming that “*for all this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him*” (Small Catechism). Our desire that the words of our mouths might be acceptable in the sight of the Lord who is our strength and our redeemer leads us to consider the teachers of God that we hear in today’s First Lesson, the familiar words of the Ten Commandments that God gave to Moses on Mount Sinai after leading the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. In returning to the mountain where the LORD appeared to Moses in the Burning Bush, Moses receives the Torah that will instruct Israel on how they are to live together as God’s free and chosen people; it is the instruction from “*the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery*” (Exodus 20:2). It is the teaching that will guide Israel on how they are to fulfill God’s commandments to “*love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might*” (Deuteronomy 6:5) and “*you shall love your neighbour as yourself*” (Leviticus 19:18). These teachings have relevance to Christians as well as Jews; in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus cautions his followers “*do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill*” (Matthew 5:17). We continue to teach these commandments along with the Creed and the Lord’s Prayer “*so that your children may learn to trust God, proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace.*” (ELW Holy Baptism) The teachings of God continue to guide us as we seek to live faithfully as the Church which is the Body of Christ, called to “*proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*” (1 Peter 2:9).

Among these commandments is the instruction that “*you shall not bear false witness against your neighbor*” (Exodus 20:16). The Eighth Commandment is rooted in a judicial setting in which one must bear true testimony at the risk of being judged guilty of perjury; but as Luther teaches, its implications are far greater than merely in a legal context:

- “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.”

One who seeks to live in accordance with this commandment recognizes the destructive power of words, which can hurt as much or more than “sticks and stones.” They know that “*rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing*” (Proverbs 12:18). Jesus warns his followers about the destructive power of words when he calls them to “*listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles*” (Matthew 15:11), while St. Paul instructs the Ephesians to “*let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear*” (Ephesians 4:29). The letter of James goes so far to warn that “*if any think they are religious, and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless*” (James 1:26) and that “*from the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so*” (3:10). Because we have been entrusted with sharing the good news of God in Jesus Christ as God’s holy people, it is imperative that every word that proceeds from our mouths is used for the purpose that God’s intends: “*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.*” (Isaiah 55:11).

When I was serving as an acolyte in my home congregation, I would often notice the prayer that had a prominent place in the sacristy. Luther’s Sacristy Prayer instructs those called to proclaim God’s Word to pray these words before they take on this tremendous responsibility:

- “O Lord God, dear Father in heaven, I am indeed unworthy of the office and ministry in which I am to make known Your glory and to nurture and to serve this congregation. But since You have appointed me to be a pastor and teacher, and the people are in need of the teaching and the instruction, be my helper and let Your holy angels attend to me. Then if You are pleased to accomplish anything through me, to Your glory and not to mine or to the praise of people, grant me, out of Your pure grace and mercy, a right understanding of Your Word and that I may also diligently perform it. O Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, shepherd and bishop of our souls, send Your Holy Spirit to work with me to will and to do through Your divine strength according to Your good pleasure. Amen.”

All who are called to share the good news of God in Christ Jesus – which is our common baptismal calling – pray that the words we speak as God’s people might always be acceptable in the sight of God who has created and redeemed us, so that they might accomplish what God intends and build up God’s people in love of God which is ours in the Word that became flesh and lives among us full of grace and truth.

- “... all Christians [have] a common vocation. Our job is to stand with one foot on earth and one in heaven, with the double vision that is the gift of faith, and to say out of our own experience that reality is not flat but deep, not opaque but transparent, not meaningless but shot full of grace for those with the least willingness to believe it is so ... God has called us from the womb and calls us still, the tireless shepherd who never stops calling us home.” – Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life*.

Every time I have the privilege of sharing God’s Word with God’s people, I am indebted to mentors such as Pastor Ken Ensminger who inspired me and taught me what it means to be a preacher in the Church of Jesus Christ. The words of Psalm 19 that he prayed whenever he rose in the pulpit remind me and all of us who are called to share God’s Word that we must take care that every word we speak, every sentence we construct, must always be acceptable to the God who has created us, redeemed us, and commissioned us to share the Word of God that is the word of hope so desperately needed in our troubled world. May every word we speak – to one another as well as to others – always be acceptable to God so that God’s gracious loving will might be accomplished here “*on earth as it is in heaven.*”

Amen.