

**More than Words, Words, Words...**  
A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt  
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA  
On April 15<sup>th</sup>, 2018

*Acts 20:7-12, I John 3:16-24*

Our first passage today is from the book of the Acts of the Apostles. Last week, Katie preached on a story from the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts in which Peter raises a woman named Tabitha from the dead, and spoke of the power of new life in community. This week, we turn to another resurrection story from Acts, this one from the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter. Like the story of the raising of Tabitha, it too isn't in the lectionary. In this text, Paul gets a chance, like Peter did, to participate in raising someone from death. But the circumstances are quite a bit different than in the Tabitha's case. In fact, you might even say Paul indirectly had a hand in causing the death of the person he wound up raising.

*On the first day of the week, when we met to break bread, Paul was holding a discussion with them; since he intended to leave the next day, he continued speaking until midnight. There were many lamps in the room upstairs where we were meeting. A young man named Eutychus, who was sitting in the window, began to sink off into a deep sleep while Paul talked still longer. Overcome by sleep, he fell to the ground three floors below and was picked up dead. But Paul went down, and bending over him took him in his arms, and said, 'Do not be alarmed, for his life is in him.' Then Paul went upstairs, and after he had broken bread and eaten, he continued to converse with them until dawn; then he left. Meanwhile they had taken the boy away alive and were not a little comforted.*

Our second passage is from the first letter of John to the community of believers of which he was a part. Pay attention to what he says about word and speech.

*We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?*

*Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And by this we will know that we are from the truth and will reassure our hearts before him whenever our hearts condemn us; for God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. Beloved, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have boldness before God; and we receive from him whatever we ask, because we obey his commandments and do what pleases him.*

*And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us.*

Now and then, I will run across an odd account or an interesting detail in the Bible that causes me to wonder “Why did *that* make it in?” There's a little twist in a passage that grabs my eye, a word choice that catches my ear. It is part of the fun of preaching and Bible study, and the study of literature period, asking, “What was the writer trying to say by including that story or that tidbit in their larger narrative?”

For instance, why would Luke, the author of the Book of Acts, think it important to share **not just that** Eutychus was raised from the dead by Paul, but **also to relate** how the young man happened to die in the first place? I mean, you **could write** that Paul brought a young man by the name of

Eutychus back to life **without adding** that the teenager had dozed off and fallen to his death from a three story window after hearing a preacher talk on and on and on in a church meeting. **Couldn't you? You could leave that out.** Why leave that in? It's enough to give a preacher pause.

That's exactly why Luke inserts that little nugget, I think, to give preachers and teachers and communities of faith like us pause. I believe Luke intends to bring us up short—and to face the question of whether or not our words, words, words, words, words, words, words, words—might have indeed have some limits. In Presbyterian churches in particular, we love our words.

In a book like Acts, which in some ways is all about the power of speech and language to transform people and is chock full of stories of words doing just that, we have the story of at least one hearer—Eutychus—who is **apparently literally bored to death** by words spoken in the community of faith. In a larger scriptural narrative which again and again affirms that words have power to create (in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the word was God and all things came into being through that Word), you remember that. In a larger scriptural narrative where words are important, we have at least one story of how the great wordsmith Paul failed to keep at least a portion of his audience.

Before we go any further, let me provide a defense of Paul. I feel a little defensive on his behalf. Communication is always a two way street and sometimes a failure to connect is less on the part the speaker than on the hearer. Just yesterday afternoon, I was in a meeting listening to presenters give pitches for various mission trip opportunities. The fact that I kept drifting off I think had more to say about the fact that it was 1:30 in the afternoon, I'd had a big lunch, and I'd slept poorly the night before—than it had to say about the passion or eloquence of the speakers. I'll never forget the Sunday that Marjorie McGough, whose memorial service we'll be having here the weekend after next, elbowed her husband Bob about halfway through my sermon and said, loud enough for me and lots of other people to hear, **"Bob! Wake up!"** I'm sure—I'm quite sure—the fact that Bob had dozed off had nothing to do with what I was saying or how I was saying it. Sometimes people are just sleepy. Right?

Sometimes it's more than that. If you've ever tried to communicate to someone who is simply unwilling to hear what you have to say, you know why Jesus occasionally preceded his words with, "Those who have ears to hear, let them hear." You also know that what Upton Sinclair said is right, "It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends on his not understanding it." It is also difficult for me to understand something when my ego, or my self-righteousness, or my hold on a long-held idea or belief about my faith or my country or my social location and how I arrived at it depends on my not understanding it. Right?

We really can't know what was going on with Eutychus the moment he dozed off and fell out the window. Maybe the fumes from all the candles that were there overwhelmed him. Maybe he'd had a little too much wine. Maybe he was just plain tired and it wouldn't have mattered how dynamic and interesting were the words Paul and the rest of the community were using. Maybe Eutychus didn't have ears to hear.

But, in the name of our children and youth and young adults, and in the name of all who stand outside churches looking in, or list themselves on religious preference surveys as None or Done, heck, in the name of any of the rest of us who could probably identify with Eutychus in one way or another, at least from time to time, let me suggest that maybe Eutychus wasn't to blame—or at least not entirely.

Maybe the issue was **the particular words** that Paul chose. Or the **sheer volume of the words** he and the community were using in one stretch (and by the way, did you notice that after Paul and the community conversed until midnight, and he went to the street and raised Eutychus from the dead, he returned back and continued talking until daybreak). To be fair to Paul, he had a lot he wanted to communicate and he was leaving town the next day—so he was trying to get it all in. Man can I identify!

That being said, maybe what bores Eutychus and all of his modern day counterparts, maybe what bores Eutychus and his modern day counterparts almost to death, is that all he is hearing is words, words, words **and he can't see any action.**

It's not that words and speech are unimportant. Addressing the crisis of our current day, Toni Morrison wrote recently:

*"This is precisely the time when artists go to work. There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal."*

It is so vital that the words we use be well-chosen and well-crafted. Civilization depends on it. I think, for instance, of how moved I and so many of us were last night at the lyrics of the Nields' songs and how powerfully they were delivered. No one could have dozed off and fallen out a window listening to them. I believe I could have sat there and soaked it in all night. I might have been alone by the very end, but I could have sat there and soaked it in all night. I never fail to be inspired by them.

Which brings me to this truth. There comes a time, in sermons, and conversations, and relationships, and communities, and I suppose even songs, when the piling up of words without consequent positive action for good is just so much talk. That is why the author of I John, tells his community—a group of people that was experiencing its own version of polarizing influences—*Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. And before that, How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?*

As Billy Klutz says in a song he wrote, "I pray, you pray, we pray, pray, pray. We pray and we move our feet."

Unless my prayers move me to action, and the words I choose and cherish move me to deeds, they aren't finished yet. They remain nothing more than words.

"When all is said and done, a lot more is said than done." I don't know whether Aesop said that or not. Sounds more like Will Rogers. I think I read somewhere that Aesop said, "Never trust anything you read on the Internet." But after all is said and done, it's true, a lot more is said than is done. Unless our words move us to action, they are nothing more than words.

So if I talk about my love for my wife, if I talk about my love **to** my wife, and I'm not there for her, that's just words.

So if I talk about hospitality, and I don't make room at the table and in my heart for a stranger or an immigrant, I'm in danger of boring myself and the world to death.

If I talk about forgiveness, and don't take the step to actually let go of my resentment towards someone who has wounded me, I'm in danger of boring myself and the world to death.

If I talk about justice and God's heart for the mistreated and the marginalized and I look the other way or I minimize or try to defend my privilege when African-Americans continue to face redlining in housing, and being shot at simply because they are black, and are subject to different treatment than I would be in the justice system, then I'm in danger of boring myself and the world to death.

If I talk about being kind to someone with whom I disagree, and I don't sit down and have a conversation with them that reflects that kindness, then I'm boring myself and the world to death.

If I talk about not responding to evil with evil and the first thing I do is to look for a reason to retaliate, I'm in danger of boring myself and the world to death.

So Amy and Nate Weiss and their son Charlie are joining us officially this morning. The reason why they are joining is in part because they like what they hear from the pulpit, but they also like how what they hear gets translated into action in the community.

Here's a little something that Amy wrote to her connector Drayanne.

*Nate, Charlie and I are so excited to officially join Immanuel this weekend! We have been attending for a few months now and have felt so welcomed by the entire Immanuel Community. Charlie actually had the nerve to snore (loudly) during Pastor Aaron's sermon on our very first visit, (thank goodness, he didn't fall out a window) and we figured if we can feel welcomed with that we were in the right place! (And you are!)*

*Jokes aside, there have been so many little moments that made us feel at home at Immanuel and excited to join. My husband and I have been looking for our church home since before Charlie was born, but that cause became even more important when he arrived. As you know from raising your kids in the church, there are so many important benefits and responsibilities that come with being part of a faith community. We are excited to serve others together with the congregation and get involved in ways we probably don't even know exist yet.*

There's a new member who understands that the life of faith is about more than words, words, words.

In Jesus' name. Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Toni Morrison "No Place for Self-Pity, No Room for Fear" *The Nation* March 23, 2015.