

May 26, 2019 (Journey Worship)

TEXT: [Psalm 19](#)

TITLE: Word Mart

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

It's been a busy week and I had to prepare two sermons for this Sunday. The latter service has an environmental focus to it, but I was hesitant simply to do the exact same sermon twice. I wanted to do something special for you, since this is my last Sunday to preach in Journey worship before next fall. So I hopped in my car, grabbed my debit card, and headed out of town to a special place only ministers know about. It involved traveling some quirky back roads until I pulled up in front of a non-descript warehouse with a sign over the front door that said "Word Mart." It's the place where pastors and church leaders go to buy the words and phrases they need for Sunday sermons. (Yes, it does sell a few prefabricated, complete sermons but no one likes to be seen browsing in that aisle. Mostly the market sells the words you need for sermons, leaving it up to the pastor to put them all together.)

It had been a while since I'd been to the Word Mart, but overall it looked the same as always—a big, open hall with booths and displays and vendors standing behind stacks of words: words for every occasion and for every budget. As you walked in, near the entrance, were all the discount bins containing overused slogans like "Let Go & Let God," tired alliterations like "Time, Talent, and Treasures" marked down 50% for fall Stewardship campaigns, and worn copies of Robert Schuller's "Be Happy-Attitudes." There were bulk sale items, like packages of the word "just," guaranteed to inject a tone of false modesty into every prayer of intercession—as in "Lord, I just want to ask....," "Lord, I just want to say..." There was even a sale on Alphabets for Conservative Churches; they looked nice but the letters L, G, B, T and Q were all missing.

I kept walking down one aisle and saw a display of old, dusty words of interest only to church historians and antique-doctrine collectors: words such as inerrancy, infallibility, premillennialism, and *extra ecclesium nulla salus* (*outside the church no salvation*). I picked up one word and held it fondly in my hands for a moment—predestination. Presbyterians are adamant that God is sovereign over all life and all time. For quite a while we used "predestination" to talk about God's activity in our lives, but it got distorted into conversations about fate and judgment. Now we use words like "providence" to get the same idea across without the baggage of pretending we know who's in heaven and who's been left outside the pearly gates.

There was a big display related to words for political correctness and a scale to help you balance out your purchases. You put on one side words like "family values" "compassionate conservatism" and "Tucker Carlson" and on the other side you put in "social justice" "migration reform" and "Rachel Maddow" so no single faction in the church feels left out. If the vendors know you're a Presbyterian, usually they'll add a small weight so the scale tips to the left.

It was sad to see one table pretty much unattended. It basically contained words related to lost or forgotten causes. There was a brochure emblazoned with a photo of Mahatma Gandhi and the phrase “non-violent resistance” lying near the text to the old spiritual “I Ain’t Gonna Study War No More.” There was a stack of Ten Commandment overstocks, including a bunch of “Thou Shalt Not Kill” pamphlets, which felt ironic in a nation that still persists in sentencing people to the death penalty. Some of the words had clearly been handled and considered by previous shoppers, including a large selection quoting the “I have a dream” speech—y’know, people judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their characters—but in this era of Antwon Rose and white racist terrorism, it doesn’t seem like anyone truly wants to take these words home.

For this last Sunday in May sermon, I needed something flashy, memorable. Over along one wall was a big display of words that had been carefully cultivated into vocabulary rose bushes: big words, prophetic statements, definite crowd-pleasers. There was a bright red “Justice” bouquet—or a rainbow-colored “Inclusion” bush. There were also more subtle arrangements, spelling out “sexual abuse,” “wealth inequality,” and “abortion rights”—popular topics for Adult Education classes. The only problem is that each of these flowery words came with an extensive root system. For example, with the “Justice” bouquet were smaller buds labeled “prison system,” “police presence,” and “racial profiling.” Below those buds were stems and roots tied to “unfair housing practices,” “educational disparity,” and “generational racism.” Connected to the arrangement labeled “sexual abuse” were stem and root topics labeled “misogyny,” “internet porn,” “photo-shopped fashion models.”

Now for many of the Word Mart customers, the pattern was to buy one or more of these colorful, prophetic words, interconnected root system and all. But once you’re back in your church office, you simply snip off the flowers and only present the stirring blossoms to the congregation. The messy roots and related issues can be discarded, since naming “justice” is usually all that’s required for a Sunday morning service. Why stir up unnecessary controversy?

It was getting late and I wasn’t having much luck for this Journey sermon. Apart from a few anecdotes and clever turns-of-phrase, my shopping basket was almost empty. Then over along a side wall, I picked up a flyer that had blown onto the floor. It said, “*The heavens are telling the glory of God.*” I thought it must have come from the “Faith & Science” section nearby, but on the back of the flyer it said, “*Days pour forth speech and nights declare knowledge—but there is no speech, nor are there words. Their voice is not heard.*” This focus on quietism was almost anti-words. I wondered if I’d accidentally wandered into the section devoted to Eastern religions. But no, there was a big neon “Jesus Saves” sign blinking overhead, so I was still in the American Public Christianity section. I pulled up a chair and began to study this pamphlet more closely.

I re-read the small print on the flyer: *Days and nights pour out speech, but there are no words; their voice is not heard. The heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament proclaims God’s handiwork.* I realized that we Presbyterians are far too

dependent on words. For example, we think we can talk reason into people who insist climate change isn't real or convince people to change their ways regarding the environmental crisis simply through persuasive speeches. Sure, there is value in naming the facts about how we're damaging the world God has entrusted to our care. But something more than words is needed to make things right. I was reminded how often Jesus told people to learn from nature itself about how to live a righteous life—such as when he said in the Sermon on the Mount *Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Creator feeds them... Consider the lilies of the field; they neither toil nor spin, yet even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.* The deep wisdom here is that God's attention is focused on both the human order and the natural order. They are not different categories in relation to God, but one and the same. How we live with the world reflects how we live as God's children. The heavens tell us this is true. You don't need a Word Mart to buy the right phrases for this message to get out.

Before all our human words there exists a heaven-sent Word that is quite comfortable with silence, a Word that has existed from the beginning. For a time this Word became flesh and dwelt among us. Yet this eternal Word is what we most need to hear—not the busy, verbal diarrhea of vocabulary that passes for spiritual wisdom today. Churches too often have become institutions of words—of marketing, public education, style over substance, social media over God's message. Preaching Christian faith is too often like trying to make flowers grow by pulling on them. The very thing you want to promote is killed in the process. Word-based evangelism has a place, but it will always be secondary in this world where days and nights proclaim God's wisdom and the heavens themselves tell us what we need to know about the glory of God.

Back over on the table that mentioned non-violent resistance, there was another quote from Mahatma Gandhi, who wrote these words: *I told missionaries that if they could have refrained from "telling" India about Christ and merely lived the life required of them by the Sermon on the Mount, India would have appreciated their living in her midst and directly profited by their presence...Faith does not admit of telling. It has to be lived and then it becomes self-propagating.*

Suddenly the air inside the Word Mart felt stuffy and stale. I wasn't sure what I should say on Sunday, but I realized that whatever it was, it would most likely not come from a bargain bin in this place. I left behind my shopping basket and headed to the parking lot. Near the exit, oddly enough, another flyer caught my eye that had a small collection of bible verses on it: *If I speak in the tongues of humans and angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. (I Cor 13:1) "Be still and know that I am God." (Ps 46:10). "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." (James 1:22)*

As I got into my car, rolling down the windows to let out the hot air, I thought: Before the first booth was erected at the Word Mart, the Word of God existed. Long before mass mailings of church newsletters, e-blasts of congregational news, late night preachers

and inboxes full of spiritual “thoughts for the day,” the Word of God was moving and active in all the world.

What would happen if we stopped preaching—even for just a short time? Could we become embodiments of God’s word—God’s justice, mercy, love, and stewardship of the earth—instead of just loudspeakers for words about these things? The Word of God deserves to be spoken, yes, but it is not dependent on being spoken. It goes forth, day by day, night by night, reviving the souls, more to be desired than fine gold. That Psalm about the heavens are telling God’s glory ended with this familiar refrain: May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Words of our mouths—we’ve had plenty of that. Meditations of our heart—stirrings of grace, prompting us to actions of blessing—we need much more of that. So let the Word—the Spirit—the Rock and Redeemer speak to you and move you to action today and always. Truly, that will be enough. AMEN.