

**READING:** Words are powerful. Norma Davenport

Words are powerful. They can be used as a weapon, to put down, intimidate, and to bully, or for good, to encourage, inspire and to validate others. When people use words to demonize others, speakers do not describe a particular person or situation, but rather, they reveal much more about themselves, particularly, the language they choose to navigate the world. When one must resort to hate-speak, instead of using diligent research to get one's point across, that person immediately loses credibility. Other people tend to write the "hater" off as a zealot or extremist.

People who feel they must resort to personal attacks often find themselves isolated from the outside world because most stable, happy people will avoid their negativity in order to maintain their own mental health.

Angry, hurtful, words can escalate and poison one's environment (relationships). When people are consumed by hatred or self-righteousness, they often find themselves in bondage with another person or a particular ideology. Good people can be passionate about their beliefs, but at the same time, severely misguided.

When one is in bondage or "in hate" with "the other" that person is no longer free, nor does he/she have the energy left to confront the real source of one's discomfort (self hatred, insecurity, feeling misunderstood or less than).

In this election year, I want to invite you and The Better Angels of Our Nature to take a step back, take a deep breath, and while exhaling, say a prayer of gratitude for the blessings of this world. The next time you attempt to make a point, persuade, or want others to listen to your point of view, please remember that most people are just like you . . . they just want to be heard and validated. We need to make sure that our brains have adult supervision and to use our indoor voices. Please think before you speak, tweet, write, or reply, because words are powerful and our children are listening.

\*\*\*\*\*

I have decided to stick with love said Martin Luther King in 1967. He continued, "I know that love is ultimately the only answer to mankind's problems. And I'm going to talk about it everywhere I go...And I'm not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love; I'm talking about a strong, demanding love. For I have seen too much hate (on others' faces) to want to hate, myself, because every time I see it, I know that it does something to their faces and their personalities, and I say to myself that hate is too great a burden to bear. I have decided to love." `

It's Valentine's Day and I thought it was appropriate to do a sermon on love. And when I ran across the quote from Dr. King a few weeks ago, I thought they would be perfect. As he said, I am not talking about the mushy, sentimental, romantic love we tend to talk about on Valentine's Day, but a love for humankind. Frankly, because I, too, believe that hate is too great a burden to bear. It's the kind of love described in the bible in First Corinthians. Dr. King actually used these verses in the same speech. An interesting side note.

Although the love defined here is less Eros and more the agape form of love, these are some of the most often used words in weddings. Here they are.

Chapter 13. Verse 1-13. If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. <sup>2</sup>And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. <sup>3</sup>If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast,<sup>[a]</sup> but do not have love, I gain nothing.

<sup>4</sup>Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant <sup>5</sup>or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; <sup>6</sup>it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. <sup>7</sup>It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

<sup>8</sup>Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. <sup>9</sup>For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; <sup>10</sup>but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end.<sup>11</sup> When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

<sup>12</sup>For now we see in a mirror, dimly,<sup>[a]</sup> but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. <sup>13</sup>And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Ok, hate bad, love good. You can go home now. Honestly, I thought research for today's sermon would be a piece of cake because of that simple message. Hating is harder than loving. BUT, I found that there are not a whole lot of folks out there that support that argument. My internet search found quite the opposite, over and over and over again. *Hate is easy, Love is hard.* It was everywhere, whether the subject was referring to families, relationships with lovers, strangers on the Internet, or humankind in general. What a terrible predicament for me! I was going to have to come up with my own argument! Lucky you!

You all know the drill. Love is all you need. Love is the answer. Love is a many splendored thing. Do all things with love. Love conquers all. There's a million of them, yet, then people turn around and say how incredibly difficult it is to love. I just happen to think it's easy. Listen, I'm lazy so I take the path of least resistance and love is definitely it!

I first starting thinking about this whole subject when I was having a rather deeply personal conversation with a friend about family members that we had and even sometimes still have found hard to love. We both had them and we discovered that both of us had at one time been angry, disgusted, even hated these relatives for what they did, how they behaved, and how we felt when we had interactions with them.

Much to our surprise, we both figured out that it took a whole lot of energy on our part to *not* love these people. If I think about the psychic energy I've wasted on being upset with certain people in my life, I could probably be well into my second or third novel by now.

For instance, after my parents divorced and I was living with my dad, I was supposed to visit with my mom for a weekend a few times a year. She lived 3 hours away and she was to pick

me up Friday and my dad would fetch on Sunday – a typical arrangement. So, I'd start getting excited around Monday. I'd be ready as soon as I got home Friday after school. And I'd wait, and wait, and then wait some more. Sometimes, she would call before I went to bed to tell me something came up and we'd need to reschedule. Many times she never called at all. Once in a while, she showed up.

I began to get very angry and eventually really hated her - even though my father forbade me to say it. The result was an estranged relationship for years. Then a few strained calls, visits, and horrific arguments. I put a lot of energy into those – let me tell you. Finally, after marriage and a child, I decided I was exhausted by my hatred and anger. I invited her to my wedding; I've included her in my son's life. I have come to realize that I need to meet her where she is not where I want her to be. She'll never be what I wanted, expected or needed. She did and does the best she can with the life she was given. I can only change how I react to her. And, with a lot of soul searching, I wonder how I would have done had I been given her life?

As I spoke to my friend, she said the same situation occurred with her bi-polar sister. She believes this hate into love metamorphosis and the ability to have empathy for another person's story, without ego, judgment or fear, is a sign of maturity. "We're polite to others in our jobs every day with people we hardly know, so why not be courteous with people whom we call family?" She said. We both agreed that most people just want to be heard and understood. She said she decided she would rather be happy than right.

That meant rather than defending some position with the other person and attempting to prove why another person is wrong, you may need to let that go to improve the relationship. She said she asked herself "What is the price of family alienation costing me and extended family members? How do I want to be remembered?"

Although forgiveness is a gift to yourself, accept this cautionary note. As I have mentioned in sermons before, some toxic relationships are just that. Make sure you can remain healthy and happy if you remain in relationship with a particular person. There are times when a tie must be severed for your own health and safety.

As you can see, some of our issues with family and friends have to do with memories of pain and fear. Loving often means letting those go, moving beyond them and just love. Maya Angelou wrote a beautiful poem about just that. "Touched by an Angel"

*We, unaccustomed to courage, exiles from delight  
live coiled in shells of loneliness until love leaves its high holy temple  
and comes into our sight to liberate us into life.  
Love arrives and in its train come ecstasies,  
old memories of pleasure, ancient histories of pain.  
Yet if we are bold, love strikes away the chains of fear from our souls.  
We are weaned from our timidity.  
In the flush of love's light, we dare be brave,  
And suddenly we see that love costs all we are, and will ever be.  
Yet it is only love which sets us free.*

Only love sets us free. That is why I say it's easy. Hatred takes effort. You have to think about it. Terry L. Wiley, a retired professor in Communication Sciences at UW Madison wrote a short

little book last year I highly recommend, "A Primer on Moral Renewal in America." He was one of the few people I found who felt exactly like I did! So of course, I love, love, love him! The book is about the ills of our society and how we all can help to make a better world no matter our position in life. This is what he said about love vs. hate.

"The gift of love is the best we have to offer and giving it makes us all better. You can love people that do not love you back. Sometimes that is the best you will ever get from some people. But giving the love that is spurned or rejected still makes the giver better for the process and is the only way you might possibly get love back in the future. So, love is really an easy thing to give even when getting love back is not... In watching people, it seems to me that hate is hard work whereas love is easy. Hate requires a plan, perpetual view of the plan and pre-meditated expression of your hate. Love requires no plan, is spontaneous and it not only emits energy but brings energy rather than just burning it. Love very often returns love.

"This is not to say that love requires no commitment or effort...You cannot make people love you. You can love people and let them love you if they so choose. But love requires no return. Even if it is not returned, your love is your reward. There is no reward for hater; it is a unidirectional effort. Hate is hard work usually requiring a lot of time. Only the hater works at the enterprise and only the hater really gets anything from it. And what he or she gets is all bad."

Wiley's book goes on to talk about the extreme hatred he has seen against our president, especially on talk radio, news programs, and the Internet. He believes it is primarily racially motivated. He also discusses hate speech around religion.

He writes, "Somewhat ironically, religion is another issue that is responsible for hatred throughout the world. ...Hate is not a permitted practice in most religions. Regardless of whether you practice a religion and regardless of what religion you practice, the choices should have nothing to do with how our country is governed and hate has no place in the process....Right and wrong are not exclusively religious concepts. Until we get rid of most of the unnecessary, misdirected hate among our citizens, we will never be able to jointly work together in solving our societal problems."

Wiley concludes that hatred expressed on internet, people believing what they hear with no fact checking, and misdirected frustration all lead to hate and war. He believes compassion, integrity, and love will be the fundamental values that can solve societal and world ills. I don't think anyone can argue with that.

I began with words from Martin Luther King. Although the following article was written primarily about racism, I believe it holds true for any hatred we experience and I simply cannot say it any better so I'll end with the words of author Dennis Merritt Jones on the occasion of the MLK memorial dedication.

He writes,

"Hate is a toxic energy, which can wear many different masks, but behind them all dwells the same thing -- fear. Have you ever carried the burden of hate? I know how hard it is to let it go, especially when it seems to be "justified" by another's act of cruelty, thoughtlessness or

selfishness. Irrespective of how the hate shows up, when our emotional body harbors intense feelings of hate, we are the ones who suffer; we isolate ourselves from life and actually end up holding ourselves a hostage from happiness.

Sadder yet is the burden of hate that many are immersed in because their caretakers taught them how to hate as a way of life, even before they could talk. There is no question that this kind of hate is born in the fertile womb of fear, which often out-pictures itself as an over inflated sense of superiority, intolerance, bigotry and arrogance. This is sad because it really boils down to a lack of understanding of others who may be different than they -- fueled by fear.

“Regardless of how it came about, if hate is a burden we bear today, we owe it to humankind, our friends and family and, more importantly, we owe it to ourselves to heal it. Why? Because life is too long to live it in a self-imposed bondage of anger, resentment and condemnation; and it doesn't serve our soul's purpose for being on the planet. The good news is, if willing, we can set ourselves free of the toxicity of hate today. How? Dr. King was right -- by sticking to love. Confucius wrote, "To put the world in order, we must first put the nation in order; to put the nation in order, we must put the family in order; to put the family in order, we must cultivate our personal life; and to cultivate our personal life, we must first set our hearts right." And so, here we are still trying to learn the lessons of Confucius and Martin Luther King. Separated by space and time and yet the message is the same: To set our hearts right is to set ourselves free to love and to each be the one who makes the world a better place. Martin Luther King, Jr. was a very wise man: Stick with love.”

May it be so.