



# “The Wisdom of a Good Word”

Text: Proverbs 25:11-15

*a sermon by Kevin Fleming*

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

It has been a delight to watch the world discover - or rediscover - Fred Rogers. Known as “Mr. Rogers” to children, young people, and adults the world over, he was also known as The Reverend Mr. Fred Rogers, a teaching elder/minister of the word and sacrament of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Fred held honorary doctorates from just about every institution of higher learning imaginable and was a much in demand commencement speaker. Having had the honor of meeting him on one occasion, I can tell you that he was in life exactly as he presented himself on the television. Fred was, in every possible way, our favorite neighbor.

What we remember of Mr. Rogers was, of course, his gentleness. Mr. Rogers spoke gently and calmly. He never raised his voice. He never disparaged anything or anyone. He calmed fears and, even when appearing before congressional committees, he could offer a rebuke in so peaceful a manner that calloused representatives could hear him and be persuaded.

Maxwell King, author of a biography on Rogers, wrote in an article in *The Atlantic*:

*He insisted that every word, whether spoken by a person or a puppet, be scrutinized closely, because he knew that children - the preschool-age boys and girls who made up the core of his audience - tend to hear things literally.... He took great pains not to mislead or confuse children, and his team of writers joked that his on-air manner of speaking amounted to a distinct language they called “Freddish.”*

*Mr. Rogers knew that words hold incredible power. Words can build people up or tear people down. Words can bring peace and wholeness or they can divide and destroy. Mr. Rogers used his words, and the advent of television, to educate, comfort, inspire, and educate.*

A word fitly spoken  
is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.  
Like a gold ring or an ornament of gold  
is a wise rebuke to a listening ear.

The ancients knew the power of words and what they were capable of creating or unleashing. The pages of scripture are replete with cases of words spoken which resulted in creating or corrupting. The universe itself is “spoken” into being by God “in the beginning.” Blessings are pronounced. Promises are made. Community is created.

But words also destroy. Words spoken against another bring death. False gods are claimed as true. Curses are imposed. Treachery is unleashed. Community is destroyed.

All of these can be found in the pages of scripture.  
And the power of words is clearly understood.

“Whoever would love life and see good days  
must keep their tongue from evil  
and their lips from deceitful speech.” - 1 Peter 3:10

“Do not let any unwholesome talk come out  
of your mouths, but only what is helpful  
for building others up according to their needs,  
that it may benefit those who listen.” - Ephesians 4:29

Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body,  
but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest  
is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire,  
a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts  
the whole body, sets the whole course of one’s life  
on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. - James 3:5-6

There are many other citations that could be offered, but the message is clear: the way of wisdom - of living in connection with God and neighbor - is restored, renewed, and redeemed by the power of a good word.

In our time and place, our words have become coarse and destructive. Our language has become so damaging and deplorable that we have created the term “hate speech.” We join with those who speak in tropes and dogwhistles, metaphors and metonymy, using words to demean and diminish. We revert to our childhood patterns of name-calling and insults all designed to hurt and de-humanize. We know that the old rhyme we were taught is a lie: “sticks and stone may break my bones, but names will never break me.” It was a lie back in 1862 when it

was first published and it is a lie to this very day. Words break and bash and bruise and if you do not believe that to be true, just listen to the words that fill our news reports each day. Vicious and violent, savage and shameful, we hear the words of division and destruction and sometimes - God forgive us - we repeat them or reshape them to wound and torment.

Are these the behaviors of the creatures God created and called "good?" Is this how far we have fallen from the pinnacle of God's creation that we are scarcely indistinguishable from the creatures of the woods and forests? Have we so marred the image of God in which each and every person of earth is created that we intentionally use words to slander and slice each other in an attempt to appear superior? I'll leave you to consider that, because it turns what's left of my stomach.

What are we to do? What does wisdom ask of us?

First, put away the intentional word of pain and hurt. Don't use the language God gave each of us to intentionally and premeditatively harm another human being. Dr. King taught us that "hate is too great a burden to carry" and language that supports hate is an equally heavy burden. Put away the language of prejudice, bigotry, and bias, however it may creep into your words. Be done with it. Use your words to build up, create and recreate, repair and restore, and reject the words of anyone who uses language to do anything other than that.

Second, use words to encourage and cheer. Years ago, I worked with a wonderful woman - named Elinor Fleming (no relation) - who had what she called a "theology of the name tag." Ellie suggested that people in service jobs - people who wear nametags - may work all day and never hear their name. So, she took to calling the people by the name on their nametag and was usually greeted with a smile and a better attitude. I've done this ever since Ellie shared it with me and I can tell you it works. The cashier, the waiter, the teller, whoever it is - seem to realize that I can see them, that they are no longer invisible. Give it a try, won't you? Call people you don't know by their name and watch what happens.

Third, use your words to build connections. God created us to live in connection - in community. Use your words to make that happen. Some connections are for only as long as it takes to check out at a store. But, use those few moments to connect. "How is your day going?" and then stop to listen. "Are you having a good day?" and then listen. Speak a warm word to the person you might otherwise pass by.

Let your words build up and refuse to let them tear down.

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At the end of every service of worship is a moment called the “benediction.” The word comes from the Latin *benedicite* which means, “good word.” Let your words be a good word that blesses and commends. Harness the destruction of the word spoken in hatred and unleash the power of a good word, rightly spoken, and offered with generosity.

“A word fitly spoken” - a word spoken at the right time - a word offered with peace and joy - speak that word, for there is nothing more valuable in all the world.

There is great wisdom in a good word. Speak those words and the world will be blessed because you were there. Speak a good word. For now and evermore. Amen.



First  
Presbyterian  
Church

609 South East Second Street  
Evansville, IN 47713  
(812) 423-6297  
[www.firstpresevansville.com](http://www.firstpresevansville.com)

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is a partner congregation with  
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