Another Look at Words

Rev. Dr. Edward L. Wheeler
President
Interdenominational Theological Center

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“Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me” was a phrase I heard, learned and repeated as a child. I am sure parents, family members and a teacher or two who taught me that phrase meant well. Certainly they were trying to help me, and other children, learn how to ignore the words that demeaned, devalued, condemned and were meant to hurt you deeply. The phrase was perhaps thought to be a protective shield around young and easily impressionable children. No matter how noble the intention may have been, the longer I live, the more I realize how devastating this innocent sounding phrase truly can be. Words are every bit as hurtful and damaging, destructive and deadly as sticks and stones.

As a Christian minister, former pastor and theological educator, I realize more and more how powerful words can convey good or evil. The fact that I believe “the Words became flesh and dwelt among us,” ought to be adequate proof of the significance of words. An indication that words matter is that through the empowering of the Holy Spirit, words that preachers regularly proclaim from pulpits globally, continually deliver transformative impact on countless lives. They matter so much that great caution should be taken to do all that is possible “to rightly divide the word of truth.” Words should be handled with care so that they convey a clear and understandable message. Theologians must never take the power of words and language for granted. To be sloppy with words is to invite misunderstanding, misinterpretation, erroneous conclusions and devastating consequences.

However, ministers and preachers are not the only ones who need to use words with precaution and precision. The disruption in communication via social media has allowed an unprecedented connectedness that is wonderful. This channel for expression has also opened the door to mean-spirited, life devaluing, demonic uses of language and expression. Words are used to tear down and destroy people and the hurt is as damaging as sticks and stones. Persons have used words to
tell people that their lives are worthless and should be ended. Unfortunately, there have been persons who in desperation and despair have followed the advice and taken their own lives.

Damaging and damning words have been around since creation. It is impossible to know how many dreams have been destroyed by the statement “you will never be anything.” This weapon of “Mass Ego Destruction” is uttered by both strangers and people trusted and loved. However, it is time for those who claim Christ as Lord to heed the biblical mandate to be in control of one’s tongue and to use the power of words to redeem rather than destroy, to speak truth in love rather than out of vindictiveness, to proclaim life into people instead of death. No matter what position you hold, no matter your status or lack thereof, it is time for all of us to recognize that words Therefore, words are to be handled with care, clarity and compassion because they have serious consequences, including life or death.