

Matthew 4: 12-23 Words Matter

That words matter is something that if we stop and think about it, seems an obvious and fundamental truth. Words are how we communicate with one another, words are how what God revealed to us about God's self and about our own nature, words are how God revealed to us how we should be in relationship with God and with each other. It is significant that we speak of Scriptures as the Holy Word and Jesus Christ as the Living Word. But often we are casual about the words we use to each other and about each other. As the year ended and a new one has begun, I think that we should examine the words being thrown around so casually and so loudly. I think this should be done intentionally—really listening to the words and to what they are telling us about ourselves and how we are looking at each other. As I have mentioned before I meet with some other pastors each Wednesday morning and we discuss one of the passages assigned from the lectionary for the coming Sunday. The passage which I read from Matthew was the one chosen for this week. In it we have a different location and a different sequence for the calling of the first disciples by Jesus at the beginning of his ministry. As we were discussing the passage, I noticed another difference. In the passage from John, Jesus turns to two disciples of John the Baptist who are following him and asks them "What are you seeking?" We aren't given anything in the text which is their answer to that question. But Jesus then issues them an invitation to "Come and See." Today's passage from Matthew tells us John the Baptist has been imprisoned and Jesus has left Nazareth and moved to the Galilee where he will begin his public ministry. Jesus calls as his first disciples two sets of brothers who are fishermen plying their trade on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. The passage I read was from the NRSV translation, and if you were following the reading from the pew Bible you might have noticed a slight difference in the wording. Although the "Come and see" as found in John sounds like an invitation the grammar tells us something a little different. Both the come and see are verbs. The "come" is in the imperative, a command; while the "see" is a declarative in the future tense. In other words, grammatically a command is issued with implied consequences. Come, and you will see perhaps carries more of the embedded meaning. Matthew 4:19 in the NRSV: "And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fish for people." This sounds more like a command is being given to those in their boats: "Follow me" sounds like an imperative verb with a direct object. A command is being given which states a purpose given in the next clause: I will make you fish for people. In the same verse of the NIV translation, Jesus says: "Come, follow me." To our ears attuned to the English language that seems like the more inviting sound of John's gospel which was actually an imperative. What is interesting is that neither of these translations is exactly true to the Greek in which the documents were originally written. What Jesus says according to Matthew in the Greek contains no verbs. The literal word for word phrase is come after or behind me where "come" is an adverb. There is definitely not an imperative sense to what Jesus says, but an invitation. Of course Matthew is a little more direct with the clause which follows: he is calling them for a purpose—to change their lives from that of simple men who cast nets into the Sea of Galilee in order to gather fish to sell for their livelihood. Jesus tells them if they follow after him they will be gathering people. This may seem like a lot of effort to reach a conclusion that everyone understands: Jesus spoke to men he encountered and they left whatever they were doing and went with him about the countryside of Galilee. Whether the words were an invitation or a

command, they experienced a transformation. They were no longer going to be proceeding on their previous pathway. What we need to think about relates to how God and Jesus work in the world today. In some ways it can be seen as splitting hairs to talk about the grammar—is it an invitation or a command? Yet within this grammar there is a fundamental difference to understanding what God desires. Our Reformed faith states that we are all called into the body of Christ, just as the disciples were called into the group which followed Jesus around the countryside. Careful examination of the text leads to the conclusion that this call is indeed an invitation—not a command or a compulsion. However, the invitation does not stand alone today just as it did not stand alone when Jesus called then. Once the invitation is accepted something is expected. In John, the sequence is for the disciples to see—to see who and what Jesus is and does. In Matthew, the sequence is to leave what they know and be made into someone different. Sometimes we have the tendency to stop our participation at the point where we recognize Jesus calls. We know, have faith in the words in Scripture that tell us Jesus seeks us, calls to us, has come to offer us forgiveness—but often we stop there. It is like that acceptance of that call is all there is. When Jesus calls the disciples in Matthew, they leave their boats—their nets, even in the case of the second set of brothers—they leave their father in the boat. There is a clearly defined before and after to their lives. Our passage in Matthew begins by telling us before he calls these men that Jesus has begun to proclaim the same message that John had proclaimed: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” After their calling verse 23 tells us: “Jesus goes throughout Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.” As we continue looking at Jesus’ ministry through the eyes of Matthew we see that how Jesus enacted the purpose of God as spoken through the prophets is important. Jesus goes about teaching, healing and proclaiming God’s nearness. These things that Jesus did in his ministry were inclusive—crossed many preconceived boundaries. So it is also important that we are care to carefully look into the Scriptures to draw out their meaning for us, not to infuse our own tendencies into God’s revealed word. When we read Isaiah 9: 2, we find a very familiar verse that also appears as we move through Advent. “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.” Our understanding is that the great light that appeared is Emmanuel—Christ who became incarnate and brought God’s light and kingdom to earth. That quote is the most common rendition of that verse. We see this is a historical event—but in the Hebrew the verb tenses used are not past tense, but present and in Hebrew the present tense called qal is not a onetime event in present time, but the expression of an action which continues in the present. Because our tradition usually understands that the light Isaiah was speaking of was Jesus, use of the past tense seems right. Light came into the darkness with Jesus’ birth. That is definitely a true and faithful understanding, but it is not completely all that is there. Again, what we are most comfortable with is that Jesus’ came to earth, ministered here and then after fulfilling his purpose for our redemption ascended into heaven. What we are not so comfortable with is that in the form of the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, Jesus is still present here and now. We are comfortable with the Holy Spirit as our mediator—the one who will intercede for us. We are not so comfortable with the Holy Spirit as described in the book of Acts. There the Holy Spirit is very actively moving in the world. Another reading of the Hebrew tells us we are still being described by the passage in Isaiah: the people who are walking in darkness—those who are

dwelling in deep darkness—on them light has shined. And that light is still Jesus, Jesus who still calls us to come after him. And the things we are invited to do still have the power to be a light in the world. When Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, it wasn't because things were going well. Verse 11 tells us he wrote in response to a problem: "For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters." The believers are fragmented and divisions are occurring. Corinth was a large and very diverse place. It existed at the intersection of trade routes and people of many backgrounds gathered there. Those who responded to the gospel message were just as diverse which has led to this issue—each group has taken the gospel message and the words used to proclaim it have been used to make claims lifting up the one who proclaimed the message. Paul's challenge for them is for them to understand just who called them into the body. In whose name were they baptized? Not who baptized them. Verse 17, "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power." When we take words and use them to disrespect others, to lift ourselves up which usually means someone else is being pushed down—we empty the message of Christ which God sent him to deliver. A message which echoes down from the very beginnings of our faith: God loves righteousness and justice. Yes God is merciful. Yes God sent Christ to redeem us. But God also sent Christ to teach us; to tell us and show us the meaning of the words of the two greatest commandments: Love God with all your heart, mind and soul. Love your neighbor as yourself where the neighbor included the Samaritan, the Gentile, even the enemy. As we find in Micah 6: 8: "He has told you, O mortal, what is good and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God." If our words do not reflect the total message of the good news, then our actions will also fail and we will remain in the darkness despite the light which shines upon us. After all, Christ was sent to the world. Those words means it's not all about us and our redemption but about God's desire for justice and righteousness to spread throughout the world. Words matter. And the way we use the words of the Living Word matter as well. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.