

## **“Words Create Reality”**

### **Genesis 1:1-5**

*The Freedom of a Christian* is one of Martin Luther’s most popular writings and a classic of Christian spirituality. In it, Luther presents the most important themes of the Christian faith in a simple and clear way.

What does a treatise written by a German monk 500 years ago have to say to us today as we navigate a pandemic, Black Lives Matter, climate change, sexism, white supremacy, the plight of migrants and asylum-seekers, an attack on the Capital building by domestic terrorists, and so much more – in addition to our personal struggles with health, work, and relationships?

Luther taught that all human beings are created in God’s image and therefore are inherently good. Yet human nature is distorted because of our bondage to sin. Our president’s human nature is especially distorted which results in the breakdown of community and in injustices and evil.

Imagine a dog with a juicy steak in its mouth staring down at a pond. Reflected on the surface, the dog sees another steak that is bigger and juicier than the one it already has – that’s how temptation works. The dog tries to snatch the reflected steak, but the moment it opens its mouth, the real steak falls into the pond and disappears. In going after the reflection, the creature ended up losing what it already had. That is the tragedy of the human condition and the beginning of our bondage to sin. We want to seize by violence or cunning what already belongs to us by grace: love.

When we don't believe the amazing word proclaimed in the gospel, we spend our lives looking for substitutes to God's love. We think in our hearts: if I could get that job, or find that partner, or get straight A's, or get rid of this compulsion, or be president 4 more years, then I would be happy and fulfilled.

So, we drop the steak. And in so doing we also risk turning others into mere objects meant to serve our needs. When taken to the extreme, that bondage to sin has resulted in things as horrible as slavery, sex trafficking, colonialism, mass incarceration, insurrection, and genocide.

The good news is that God's ultimate response to sin is not punishment but healing, reconciliation, and liberation. The Word of God has the power to set us free to empower us to work for the healing and liberation of creation and our neighbors.

The Word of God creates

Genesis makes clear that God was separate from creation, saying that "a wind from God swept over the face of the waters" (v. 2). The Hebrew word for "wind" is *ruah*, which can also be translated "spirit" or "breath." This word reminds us that God's spirit can come to earth as a mighty wind, such as on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4), or in a gentle breath, as when Jesus breathed on the disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (John 20:22).

Wind, spirit, breath. All three are important words, at the heart of God's creative work.

On the first day, God created the powerful light that is absolutely essential for life and God did it using nothing but four words, "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3). God used a set of words to bring order out of chaos and light out of darkness.

This creative speech of God has continued throughout history, through the words of the prophets and the teachings of Jesus Christ.

Words create worlds.

In the novel *City of Peace*, a Methodist pastor named Harley Camden speaks about the power of words. “I’m convinced that words create reality,” Harley explains. “It’s a very biblical idea. Think of God creating the world in Genesis, saying ‘Let there be light,’ and there is light. Jesus is described in the New Testament as ‘the Word.’ When Martin Luther King Jr., said, ‘I have a dream,’ people began to see a vision of a new world of equality. Words create reality. Whether we say, ‘I love you’ or ‘I hate you’ makes a huge difference.”

Words have always been critical to the creative work of God. In Genesis, this work continued when “God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night” (Genesis 1:5). Day and night were created when God called these periods day and night. Then God went on to use words to create Earth and seas, vegetation, birds, cattle, and finally humankind. At the end of this creative work, “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good” (v. 31).

In Genesis, God used divine words to create a good world for us to enjoy. But human words do not always have such a positive effect. If a friend gossips about us, we feel hurt. If strangers yell at us, we feel stung. If people speak to us with disrespect, tensions arise.

Words create worlds.

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth with words alone, and our speech continues to create the world that we live in. As Christians, we are challenged to take words seriously as we follow Jesus, the One who is the Word of God in human form (John 1:14).

Through history, think of how words have been used in the church to control, diminish or oppress people. “Slaves obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling,” said the apostle Paul (Ephesians 6:5). These words were used to support the institution of slavery.

“Women should be silent in the churches,” said Paul (1 Corinthians 14:34). These words were used to prevent women from preaching and teaching.

“Accept the authority of every human institution,” said the apostle Peter (1 Peter 2:13). These words gave oppressive governments permission to abuse innocent people. In a song we are about to sing, the question is asked, “How many kings?” Is our king oppressive or is our king Jesus?

These words were written in another time and place, but they continue to have a negative impact on life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They do not draw us closer to the God who created the heavens and the earth with a powerful word, and they do not help us to follow Jesus Christ, the human face of God. Clearly, we need better words today.

Our speech should reflect God’s desire for equality between people of every race. “God created humankind in his image,” says the book of Genesis, “in the image of God he created them” (1:27). Every human being is created in the image and likeness of God — whether black, white, brown or any other color. Until we treat everyone as an equally valuable creation of God, we are not being faithful to the word of God.

Genesis also tells us that “male and female [God] created them” (1:27).

Men and women are made equally in the image and likeness of God, a design for humanity that has been ignored through most of human history. In fact, it was just a little over a century ago, on August 18, 1920, that the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment was ratified, giving women in the United States the right to vote. It took far too long for us to grasp the truth of the words “in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” But maybe since male comes first and female comes second, the word order indicates that females are the upgrade!

We need words that reflect the truth of Jesus, the Word of God, who became flesh and dwelled among us. “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you,” said Jesus; “for this is the law and the prophets” (Matthew 7:12). “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31). “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (Luke 6:36). “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another” (John 13:34).

The gospel is that God loves us all passionately. Luther uses the image of marriage to describe Christ’s love. Just as in an ideal marriage everything that belongs to each partner now belongs to the other, Luther says, so it happens between Christ and the believer. What once was ours now belongs to Christ and everything that is Christ’s now belongs to us also. Therefore, our sin is now Christ’s.

In turn, the believer receives all the beauty, love, holiness, righteousness, and eternal life that belongs to Christ. Christ is ours and we are Christ’s! Luther called this the “happy exchange”. The fullness of the exchange only happens in eternity, but we can already enjoy it in anticipation by faith, in the expectation of hope, because God’s promises are trustworthy.

Love begets love. It's impossible for true faith not to yield abundant fruits of love because it is by faith that we awaken to God's abundant love for us in Christ – and love wants to love.

This is how Luther expresses it: **“Christian individuals do not live in themselves but in Christ and their neighbor, or else they are not Christian. They live in Christ through faith and in the neighbor through love.”**

Love is the fruit of faith. Love is the mark of the true Christian.

What does love look like in times of a pandemic and injustices? What does love look like in the face of migrant children and families knocking at the doors of our borders, begging for asylum from unthinkable violence and poverty? What does love look like in a society so divided by politics that a president would openly encourage his followers to attack the Capital building while the legislature was in session? What love looks like concretely here and now is up to you – and to each of us.

The freedom of a Christian is the faith that we are accepted – as unacceptable as we are, that God loves us with a parent's fathomless love, and that even our feeble efforts of planting seeds of love will yield abundant fruits of justice and peace, because even though the concrete form that love takes is up to us, the harvest belongs to God. That is the freedom of a Christian.

Since words create worlds, we need to be using language that communicates the equality of the human beings created by God, as well as words that express the truth, love, and mercy of Jesus.

On the first day, God brought order out of chaos and light out of darkness. We can do the same, with the words we speak today.

May the peace of God . . .

#510 – Word of God, Come Down on Earth