



# Why Words Matter: Twelve Good Reasons and One Caution

L. DEANE LAGERQUIST

**W**e are drowning in words. This is not news to anyone. In our early twenty-first-century American world, words are not a scarce resource. Our eyes and ears and mouths are filled with words from morning to night. Our clothing and our buildings and our transportation are covered with words that proclaim our preferences in music or loyalty to athletic teams, declare our political affiliations, and suggest stuff we might enjoy buying. Perhaps that is why we so often ignore, squander, or misuse words both outside and inside our churches. Words are as omnipresent as plastic—cheap, malleable, and frequently tossed away. Surrounded by words, we underestimate their potency and disregard their power to transform our minds, to penetrate our hearts, to compel our hands to action. We forget that words matter.

## I

What happens to me has happened to you, too. When I rent a car and I need to find the lights, I wish that the knobs were labeled with words. The tiny pictures are intended to identify each knob and button's function to any driver, no matter what languages the driver speaks or reads. I understand the intention. I applaud its generosity. I still wish that some designer had insisted that the car I have rented would have its knobs labeled with unambiguous words: defroster, turn-signal, headlights: on and off, high and low.

*Words matter. Words are necessary for communication and community. They transform and refresh. They convey meaning and they convey God. Since words have the power both to create and destroy, we attend to them carefully.*

Words matter when I need accurate, precise information. Anyone can come up with a list of these situations: instructions for putting together a toy; rubrics for when to stand, sit, or kneel during the liturgy; the itinerary for a trip with flight times; or directions to the hospital. This is a matter of utility and sometimes of safety. It is not always urgent, but the need for clear, unambiguous communication presents a situation in which having the correct words matters.

## II

Another automotive example: One of the first times I took my old, brown Volvo station wagon to the shop, the mechanic and I had an extended conversation about seals. The sea animals did not come into our exchange: knowing that the topic was the car's operation excluded aquatic life. The point in question was more grammatical than zoological. We were considering the distinction between a kind of seal (such as a flat ring made of rubber) and the act of sealing something to prevent leakage.

In this case, words mattered but more than the proper word was required. If we were to understand each other, we needed accurate terms used properly. If we were to get my car working again, we had to use words according to the conventions of the language. Because words come in languages, if we want words to work, conventions matter.

## III

Here is a story from a great lover of words, the late theologian Joseph Sittler. It too involves automotive repair. Anyone who heard Sittler tell this story (I've no doubt that he told it many times) will hear his resonant voice and recall his delight in the theological lesson he learned from an Israeli auto mechanic who repaired his car. I think the problem was with the radiator. When Sittler returned to retrieve the car, now functioning as it should, the mechanic declared the radiator *tzadik*. From its biblical use, Sittler recognized the Hebrew word's meaning: his radiator was now *righteous*. The car would run. Recalling the word's automotive meaning, Sittler taught his listeners that righteousness is not a quality human beings acquire on their own. Rather, righteousness is a matter of being in functioning relationship with all the parts of the machine or, more appropriately, of the body. It was a Pauline lesson updated to twentieth-century experience.

Words matter. They are tools that should be kept in good repair and used with care and skill. Along with wrenches and seals, words matter for getting the car running, for keeping it from losing its fluids, and for turning the lights on. Literally. Because words can be as slippery as a wet seal sliding off a boulder at the beach, words can either confuse us and inhibit communication or be the spark of profound insight.

## IV

"Use your words." The now common admonition, spoken firmly by the parent of a small child, is filled with various proportions of desperation and hope. Pa-

rental desperation mirrors the child's utter frustration and inability to convey an immediate but simple need, a deep desire, or an exquisite delight. The hope is that the child will breathe out a bridge of words that allows the longing parent to cross over to another place and, once there, share the child's delight, satisfy the child's desire, or meet the child's need. Without words, the two are locked together in mutual incomprehension. With words, there is the possibility of being linked together in mutual understanding.

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Words matter because without them we are trapped inside ourselves. Words give us the possibility of sharing the most basic resources for life. With them, we can seek meaning together and rejoice in mutual discovery.

## V

"What do you call that?" It is a rose. "What is the word for this?" This is apple pie.

If you have lived among people who speak a language other than your own, learned a new language, or welcomed a foreign guest, then you will recognize the form of these questions and what motivates them. Behind the formula is the persistent human craving to know our world and to share it. We yearn for the words that accomplish what the hymn writer described as "linking sense to sound and sight."<sup>1</sup>

"Bardak Çay." I carefully form the Turkish sounds, repeating the words that my friend Gülin assured me will communicate to the waiter my desire for tea in a tulip-shaped glass. Delivering a small glass of tea cradled in a red and white plastic saucer to an American professor who is weary from hours of touring is all in a day's work to the waiter. To the professor, the hot, sweet liquid flowing from the glass into her mouth is a miracle.

Words matter. Words are both miraculous and accomplish miracles. They transform. That is a lesson we learn when we feel the joy that rushed through Helen Keller the moment she recognized the word *water* being spelled into her hand by Annie Sullivan.

## VI

Memory work was mandatory in my confirmation instruction. Like generations of young Lutherans, week by week we committed Luther's words to memory. We learned to ask his questions; we learned to recite his answers. Our frustration at the task was matched by our teachers' hope that we would someday recognize in our own lives the experience of grace that was being spelled into our minds.

<sup>1</sup>Folliott S. Pierpoint, "For the Beauty of the Earth," in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* [hereafter *ELW*] (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006) #879.

Few of us had any memory of our own baptisms which, having been administered in the mid-1950s, were probably rather tidy events: three drops of lukewarm water dribbled on our heads, quickly blotted by a soft, white towel, hand-embroidered by a faithful woman of the congregation. If we had remembered, or if we were paying attention on those Sundays when other infants were baptized, we might not have wondered at the tininess of the drops of water. We could explain, "Baptism is not simply plain water. Instead it is water enclosed in God's command and connected with God's Word."<sup>2</sup> Words matter when faith receives the gift they accomplish—"This is most certainly true."

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Nonetheless, the power of God's word was communicated more profoundly when I witnessed a child standing on her own feet beside the font and declaring with her own mouth her desire to be baptized. So too when I have watched a college student drenched with water, so much water spilling over him that it seemed enough to supply wine to an entire wedding party (but that, of course, would require a different command and would be another miracle entirely). The miracle of baptism is that although the water drowns our death, the word of God fills us with new life.

So too, when the taste of God is in our mouths, we know that the Lord is good. Added to a fragment of bread and a sip of wine, the words matter. With a "for you" in our ears, the morsel is multiplied. There is enough and more than enough to accomplish "forgiveness of sin...also life and salvation" for 5,000 and more, with baskets left over.<sup>3</sup>

## VII

Imagine, if you can, a reader of Genesis who comes to the book knowing nothing of the Bible, who has not even been told that it is the word of God. Imagine, if you will, that there is a person who does not know that the story begins with creation and so knows nothing of the Creator. When such a person reaches the sixth day, and comes to God's announcement of an intention to make humankind in the divine image, all that reader will know of God is that God makes things. On this basis, British Anglican Dorothy Sayers argued that the "characteristic common" to those made in the image of God is "the desire and ability to make things."<sup>4</sup> There is, however, a bit more: the reader will have noticed that until this point in Genesis, God has first made things using words. Divine speaking brought light and darkness, earth and water, birds, fish, and every living creature into existence. So

<sup>2</sup>Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 359.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 362.

<sup>4</sup>Dorothy L. Sayers, "The Image of God," in *The Whimsical Christian* (New York: Collier Books, 1987) 114.

too, God's word created humankind and blessed them with food and fruitfulness and responsibility. Words make worlds.

Moreover, the reader has been able to learn that God made the world because humankind also makes things with words. The Bible itself is earthen words, shaped by human hands, animated and empowered by divine breath. This ability to make worlds with words is a great, grand, and grave gift. It is a sort of dominion, a way of taking care with what God has made. How we use words matters for our lives and for the earth, the air, and the water, for the birds, the fish, and every living creature.

### VIII

Good news from the Gospel of John: God so loved the world (3:16) that God's Word took on human flesh to come into the world (1:14). What shall we say about this Word? "What language shall I borrow?"<sup>5</sup>

Even before we attempt language to express gratitude, we search for words to tell the story. We try out the angel's words and sing Mary's song. We use homely words that, like a donkey, carry us along the road first to Bethlehem and later to Jerusalem. We puzzle over the words about living water spoken to a woman at a well. We recall the sweet words about the Good Shepherd whose sheep recognize his voice. When the story becomes too familiar, too tame, and those words lose their power, we try out others.

"The incarnate word," I tell my students, "seems so abstract or at least clean and hygienic." Even John makes it so. Wanting a more vivid, messy, costly way to say this I borrow a familiar phrase, one they know. "Con carne!" I declare. "You've eaten it: chili con carne—with meat. Jesus is the Word of God with bloody meat on it." Yes, he was the child of God, and yet Jesus took on human flesh as any child does, knit together in his mother's womb. And then, in a bloody mess, he was born into a barn in Bethlehem while Rome ruled. He arrived in a messy, broken world where words are tools of injury as well as healing, where hate contends with love, where darkness fills the corners. His death on a cross was neither tidy nor tame, but bloody.

More good news from John: through him come life and light. "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it" (1:5). This Word matters. It shines a strong, healing light into the darkest, most painful places of our world.

### IX

It was ordinary time and we had been on the road for what seemed like forever. We were half-the-globe away from home and months remained before we would return there. The novelty of group travel was long gone. By now we recognized every stitch of clothing in each other's suitcases and we knew who would be late for the bus. We had hiked over a hill to the Valley of the Kings in desert heat and up a holy Indian mountain at sunrise. We had seen the bone-white ruins of Greek temples, traced the intricate stonework of Egyptian mosques, and inhaled

<sup>5</sup>Paul Gerhardt, based on Arnulf of Louvain, "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded," *ELW* #351.

sweet incense in Hindu temples and Coptic churches. We had swum in the Aegean, sailed on the Nile, drunk gallons of bottled water, and washed in lukewarm water from buckets. We had awakened to the call to prayer and eagerly anticipated the refreshment of teatime after hours in a classroom. Every day, every hour we had a new experience: A monkey stole one student's bottle of lemonade. We saw a dead horse floating in a canal where boys were swimming. Several women bought saris. Beggars showed us their missing limbs. We rode on bullock carts. A dog bit another student. We dashed across streets crowded with taxis and motorcycles carrying entire families. A temple elephant gave us a blessing. Following the teacher, we bent our bodies into yoga poses. With a multitude of Indians we watched a water and light show while mosquitoes swarmed.

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We were always together. There was always noise. We were never sure what would happen next. I was overstimulated and dry as an empty pot. One Sunday morning I got up early. I walked a few blocks alone. Turning around, I saw a church. The heavy doors that formed its back wall had been pushed open, so I stepped inside. When others stood, I stood; when they sat, I sat. When a worshiper offered me a hymnal, I took it, even though the Hindi words were no more comprehensible on the page than in my ears. Nonetheless, I fixed my eyes on the preacher and floated on the sound of her voice... until I recognized words. She spoke just a few clear words in English. "Ours is a living God, not a dead God," she declared to her Delhi congregation. Then she asked, "How can we enter into the resurrection? We have no need for powder or perfume with which to petition the gods. Our perfume is the blood of Jesus Christ; our perfume is the resurrected Jesus Christ; our perfume is the living God."

At the altar rail, she put a fragment of bread in my hand, "For you." In Delhi, on a Sunday, in ordinary time, a few wet words soothed my raw emotions, pierced my heart, and refreshed my dry spirit. *Tzadik*. Words matter when they create and when they redeem.

## X

Bursting through the kitchen door, holding aloft a perfect Pullman loaf, its aroma rising like incense, she shouted, "I made this bread!" These were triumphant, joyful, grateful words from a young woman who had eaten this kitchen's legendary bread since her childhood: towers of toast, many dozen sandwiches, and consecrated mouthfuls anticipating the feast to come.

Theologian Gordon Lathrop tells us that just as the Word took on flesh, the bread of life requires local bread: a pyramid of pita, still inflated from the oven's

heat, piled on a tray, balanced on the head of a boy riding a bicycle through the streets of Cairo. A crusty Swiss loaf shared with friends on the lakeshore. A soft Porterhouse roll. Hot fry bread. A bagel. A round brown loaf, made by your own hands.

Missiologist Lamin Sanneh tells us that just as the Word once took on flesh, even so the word of life requires local words—just as in Acts 2:6–11 CEB:

Everyone heard them speaking in their native languages.... Parthians, Medes, and Elamites; as well as residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the regions of Libya bordering Cyrene; and visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism), Cretans and Arabs.

Maybe today this reads:

Everyone in their native languages.... Portuguese, Mexicans, and English; as well as residents of Malaysia, Japan, and Canada, Peru, and Argentina, France and Pakistan, Egypt and Liberia, crossing borders to the ends of the earth.

Words matter, and so do languages. Like bread, words feed us, delight our senses, and evoke our memories. Filled with the Spirit's wind-like power they send us out with a message that requires language crafted as if by a skilled young baker, eager to share what has given her life.

## XI

After ten encouraging words about why words matter, a solemn caution: words are dangerous. Some knock the wind out of us, taking our breath away with their ugliness and loathing. The actions they instigate, the experiences they narrate, and the memories they recall can be horrifying rather than delightful. Some words render us invisible or make evident where we do not belong and where we are not welcome. Words can divide *us* from *them*. Racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia: words like these mean hate, and words used in their service do damage. These words are poison rather than nourishment. They are sticks and stones used as weapons rather than to build a dwelling. The great, grand, and grave ability to make worlds with words is also the power to destroy. As a poet and essayist, Adrienne Rich warns us that "beautiful language can lie, that the oppressor's language sometimes sounds beautiful."<sup>6</sup> Words matter because their power is like fire that destroys as easily as it warms or sheds light.

## XII

Created and redeemed by God's word, we use words to speak to God. Our prayers, we sing, rise up like incense. We take care in crafting new prayers to express our deepest desires, our joyous praise, and our simple thanks. Such a prayer

<sup>6</sup>Adrienne Rich, "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity (1982)," *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–1985* (New York: Norton) 123; see also [http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/culture/5852/%E2%80%9Csplit\\_at\\_the\\_root%E2%80%9D%3A\\_adrienne\\_rich\\_and\\_%28religious%29\\_identity/](http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/culture/5852/%E2%80%9Csplit_at_the_root%E2%80%9D%3A_adrienne_rich_and_%28religious%29_identity/) (accessed April 16, 2012).

sparked the question behind this essay about why words matter. The pastor gave us words to petition God: “Make us people worth having as neighbors.” We use the words that come to us, imprecise and ungrammatical, buckets full of holes yet adequate to carry our petitions. We borrow words, well-worn by centuries of use in the assembly and in solitude. After many seasons praying the psalms, poet Kathleen Norris finds that “these ancient words still have the power to move us, and on a level too deep for words, we comprehend them as truth.”<sup>7</sup> Words matter, yet when they fail us, the “Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words” (Rom 8:26).

### XIII

The word *faith*, in English, is a noun that requires action. Faith without activity is dead. The first action is knowing the words; the second is affirming their truth; the third, finally, is trusting God’s promises and living in them. Similarly, the word *vocation*, in English, is a noun that requires action. Like faith, which comes through hearing the word of God, vocation is received by hearing God’s voice and obediently acting upon that call. The word vocation, as is so often pointed out, is related to voice. Thus, vocation involves God’s voice speaking to us. The word obedience, as is seldom noticed, is related to hearing as in the idioms “to give ear” and “I hear you.”

Words matter when they are heard. God speaks to us. We speak to one another. When we hear them, words have power to transform our minds, to penetrate our hearts, to compel our hands to action. God hears our prayers. “Make us people worth having as neighbors. Give us loving words. Teach us to use them to care for all that you have made.” ⊕

*L. DEANE LAGERQUIST, professor of religion at St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota, encourages students to exercise care with words as they write and speak, read and listen. She teaches courses about the Bible, Lutheranism, religion in the United States, and Christianity in India. Her publications include From Our Mothers’ Arms: A History of Women in the American Lutheran Church (1991) and The Lutherans (1999).*

<sup>7</sup>Kathleen Norris, *Acedia & Me: A Marriage, Monks and a Writer’s Life* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008) 36.