

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

**Sticks and stones may break my bones,
But word can never hurt me...**

You'll recall from last week's worship, it is our intention each week this Advent/Christmas season to consider different ways of expressing love to one another. As Gary Chapman says in his best-selling books The Five Love Languages, each person speaks a primary love language. In order for his emotional "love tank" to be filled, he must have his love language spoken or expressed. His studies have shown that the five primary love languages are: 1) time; 2) affirmation; 3) acts of service; 4) physical touch; 5) gifts. If you have not taken the profile which was handed out last week to help determine your love language, please pick one up today and take it sometime this week.

Today our theme is that of affirmation. For some people, they feel most loved when people affirm them with words. "You look so handsome in that shirt" or "You did such a good job on that book review" or "Thank you so much for washing and waxing the car for me." These are all affirming words. Words of affirmation may be about a person's personality, his physical appearance, his behavior or conduct. The writer of Proverbs says, "(A tongue has the power to nourish life or kill it)" (Prov. 18:21)..

There are few words more affirming and encouraging than the words of our text, Isaiah 40: 1-11. Here we have Isaiah seeing the plight of man—all of man. Sin in every man brought the same diagnosis—death. But in the same breath, he announces a cure! Yes, a cure for death itself. His words echo in our ears, "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for..." (Isa. 40: 2). Sins "red as crimson" become "white as snow" (Isa. 1:18). How? By laying the "iniquity of us all" upon a Savior—the Savior born on Christmas Eve (Isa. 53:6).

Allow these words to affirm you as His people, forgiven and restored by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the Christmas message! A message of affirmation of who we are and to whom we belong because of Jesus.

He notes by his very words that there is great need to speak words of affirmation over and over: "Comfort, comfort" He says. Not just once, but continue to announce the Good News. It's not enough to say it just once. Not like Tevi in "The Fiddler on the Roof." Remember, his wife begged for him to tell her he loved her. His reply? "I told you I loved you when I married you, if I should change my mind I'll let you know."

Isaiah says to repeat it often, vigorously, fearlessly, and unreservedly. Do you hear that message? That's the message of Christmas. Not, "You'd better be good, Santa Claus is comin' to town," but instead, "You and I aren't good, so Jesus is comin' with the gift of forgiveness." Could there be a better gift? No more excuses, no more "Adam-and-Eve" blaming, no more guilt-filled nights. Your sins are forgiven. All of them.

Isaiah had every reason to demolish the people of Israel. He had been sent by God to call them to repentance; however, they rejected him. They persecuted him. Yet Isaiah did not tell them off. God told him instead to comfort Israel, and he did. To be sure, he warned them of God's impending judgment. The people of Jerusalem were carried off into Babylonian captivity, but Isaiah comforts them and assures them that there will be pardon, forgiveness, and restoration. Though justice demanded that their captivity never end, pardon was granted. Though they had worshiped idols and dishonored God with their empty rituals, God still loved them. God would not only resurrect them from exile, but would also forgive them their sins. That was the comfort they desperately needed. And yes, it is the comfort we need to hear as well.

Despite Babylon's attempt to silence God's people, or any other enemy's attempt, it would be futile. Assyria, Babylon, all the enemies "are like grass...grass (that) withers and the flowers (that) fall" (Isa. 40:6-7). "...The Word of ... God stands forever" (Isa. 40:8). The nations, now so powerful, Isaiah says, will all disappear, and God's Word will come true. A redeemer would rescue the captives as well as all mankind. Forgiveness was granted to Israel, just as it is granted to us.

The rescue took place that first Christmas when the angels announced, "Today, in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord" (Lk. 2:11). It was a rescue that brought about more than freedom from some bondage here on earth, but a rescue that freed us from sin, death, and the power of the devil. And even as He came that first Christmas, so we know He will return a second and final time when "all the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats" (Matt. 25:32).

God came to you today and gave you comforting words of affirmation in the absolution. As your pastor, I assured you that your sins were forgiven because of Jesus! Affirmation continues to come to us in the words that I share this morning with you from the pulpit and in the Sacrament of Holy Communion: "Take eat... take drink... for the forgiveness of your sins."

The comfort Isaiah proclaimed is our comfort this Christmas season, "Your sins are forgiven, a Savior has been born." Talk about affirmation! Is there any better news? We can stop the excuse making. No more blaming others. We can take responsibility and receive forgiveness and restoration. He comes to fill our spiritual love tanks with the gift of forgiveness.

With forgiveness comes eternal life. Yes! Eternal life! The ultimate question is, "What happens to me when I die?" The answer is found only in God's Word: "I tell you the truth, whoever hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has eternal life and will not be condemned" (Jn. 5:24). The moment one is brought to faith through the Spirit of God, he or she "has crossed over from death to life" – eternal life. Talk about affirming!

The majority of people this Christmas season will miss receiving this affirmation, because they miss having faith in the manger Child. They miss the real meaning of the season. For them Christmas is nothing more than traveling to a snow packed mountain and skiing for three days or attending the office party that promises lots of food and drink. A “Merry Christmas” only comes to fruition when the recipient knows the Savior who gives reason for merriment!

It should be our task as God’s people to make sure as many people as possible know the real reason for the season so that Christmas might gladden their hearts and souls. The greeting in our cards can clearly proclaim the Christmas message.

Christmas love brings forgiveness—forgiveness for the many times we have failed as God’s people to celebrate the affirmation that is ours through Jesus and the affirmation we fail to give to others. We come this morning to receive through Word and Sacrament the power to be more Christ-like, to be more affirming toward others with His love.

1) Giving Verbal Compliments

Mark Twain once said, “I can live for two months on a good compliment.” If we take Twain literally, six compliments a year would have kept his emotional love tank at the operational level. The people around you will probably need more.

One way to express love emotionally is to use words that build up. Solomon wrote, “The tongue has the power of life and death.” Many of us don’t always remember that the words we say have tremendous power to lift others up or to tear them down. Solomon further noted, “An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up.”

Verbal compliments, or words of appreciation, are powerful communicators of love. They are best expressed in simple straightforward statements of affirmation, such as:

“You look sharp in that suit!”

“I really appreciate your washing dishes tonight.”

“You must be the best potato cook in the world. I love these potatoes!”

The object of love is not about **getting** something you want, but for doing something for the **well-being** of the one you love.

2) Encouraging Words

Giving verbal compliments is only one way to express words of affirmation to your spouse. Another dialect is encouraging words. The word encourage means “to ***inspire*** courage.” All of us have areas in which we feel insecure. We lack courage, and the lack of courage often hinders us from accomplishing the positive things that we would like to do. The latent potential within those close to you in his or her areas of insecurity may away your encouraging words.

Please note that I am not talking about pressuring your spouse to do something that you want. I am talking about encouraging him to develop an interest that he already has. For example, some husbands might pressure their wives to lose weight. The husband would say, "I am encouraging her," but to the wife it sounds like condemnation. Only when a person wants to lose weight can you give her encouragement. Until she has the desire, your words will fall into the category of preaching. Such words seldom encourage. They are almost always heard as words of judgement, designed to stimulate guilt. They express not love, but rejection.

Encouragement requires empathy and seeing the world's from your loved one's perspective. We must first learn what is important to our spouse. Only then can we give encouragement.

*With verbal encouragement, we are trying to communicate, “
“I know.
I care.
I am with you.
How can I help?”*

3) Kind Words

The manner in which we speak is exceedingly important. ***An ancient sage once said, “A soft answer turns away anger.”***

When your spouse is angry and upset and lashing out with words of heat, if you choose to be loving you will not reciprocate with additional heat, but with a soft voice.

Kind words flow from a decision **to forgive** past hurts.

Forgiveness is not a feeling; it is a commitment. It is a choice to show mercy. Forgiveness is an expression of love. “ I love you. I care about you, and I chose to forgive you. Even though my feelings of hurt may linger, I will not allow what has happened to come between us.

4) Humble Words

Love makes requests, not demands.

In order to develop a close relationship with anyone, we need to know each other's desires. If we wish to love each other, we need to know what the other person wants.

The way we express those desires, however, is all-important. If they come across as demands, we have erased the possibility of intimacy and will drive others away. If however, we make known our needs and desires as requests, we are giving guidance, not ultimatums.

A request introduces the element of choice. The other person may choose to respond to your request or to deny it, because love is always a choice. That's what makes love meaningful.

5) Indirect words of affirmation

Psychologist William James said that:

The deepest human need is the need to feel **appreciated**.

The good news we celebrate everyday is that we have a God who appreciates us. We have a God who loves us so much that he was willing to give up his own Son so that our relationship with God might be restored. You are God's precious Child through the precious blood of Jesus Christ. Know that you are loved!

"Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things" (Phil. 4:8). **Think about these things, but do even more than "think" about them, tell others about these things...speak them out loud to others.**

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Psychologist William James felt that the deepest human need is the need to feel appreciated. This Advent season is a perfect time to share Christmas love through words of affirmation.

- Tell your husband's parents how great your husband is!
- Affirm your wife in front of her best friends.
- Write words of love to your children so that they can read them over and over.
- It can be the best time of the year to affirm those you work with—by words such as, "God blessed me this year with such a great partner" or "I thank God daily for this job and the opportunity I have to work with you."
- Intentionally write some words of affirmation in each Christmas card you send.
- Pay the sales clerk a compliment instead of grumbling about how long you had to wait in line.

Let's resolve this Advent/Christmas season to hold on longer to say the things we might be putting off saying! Identify those within your family whose primary love language is affirmation. Then make some plans to affirm with words of kindness. When you do so, you'll be sharing Christmas love and COMFORT. Amen.