

Dying of words

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I've noticed an alarming trend in ministry with college students: they use words better in technological media than in person. Emails, text messages and even facebook.com posts are often thoughtful, eloquent and witty. But one-on-one, the same students and I will stammer about, our words bumping into one another in mid-air. Awkward silences that don't exist in cyberspace intrude on our communication.

Rick Lischer, Eugene Peterson and others have suggested our culture is drowning in words, our lives so bombarded by wordiness that words are losing their meaning, and losing their ability to connect us to one another. Stephen Colbert famously calls this phenomenon *truthiness*: words in a word-infested culture can mean whatever we feel they should mean (His hilarious commentary on this is [worth a look](#)).

When we casually toss words around, using them crassly and carelessly, we rob them of their power to create and reconcile. But in the midst of a wordy culture we still believe in a God who speaks, who creates the cosmos, life, dust, breath, humanity by using words.

In a dark valley of death, with Israel lost in deep exile, God commands Ezekiel to speak words in the face of death. Through the words of Ezekiel we have a new creation story, an echo of Genesis One, when God speaks life into being and blows breath, or spirit, into human lungs. God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the dead bones, and Ezekiel speaks the words that are given to him, his breath and spittle cascading over the valley of death, the foot bone connecting to the shin bone, the shin bone connecting to the knee bone, the life and faith of Israel being reconstituted out of chaos through words.

St. Paul is fond of saying that the Spirit lives within us in every breath we take, in every move we make, in every word we speak. A pastor friend tells his congregation, "Words are never enough, and yet words are all we have." Our lives turn on words,

those few words spoken at the right moment in the right circumstance: “I’m sorry,” “I love you,” “She has cancer,” “It’s a girl,” “May I come home?”

Preachers know more than any others the power of words to bring life, though we easily forget the power and responsibility of ordination to the word. Walk into a nursing home and say “eternal life.” Utter words of regret and forgiveness to two people in a failing marriage. Clasp hands with those in the hospital room and say the Lord’s Prayer. Touch the casket and speak the language of committal. Sing *Amazing Grace* at the cemetery. Wrap a child in your arms and say, “I love you.” Call an estranged friend, read scripture, preach a sermon and watch the bones of the body of Christ come together.

The words for preaching all have their beginning and ending in the Word, the Word that spoke, walked, touched, healed, suffered, loved, grieved and died.

The raising of Lazarus is among the most well-known and beloved stories in our canon. So often the focus of our sermons on this text is Jesus’ grief and weeping, and that is a good sermon to preach. But before Jesus weeps at the grave he speaks to the grave, “I am the resurrection and the life.” Then he weeps as he prophesies to the dead and bandaged bones, “Lazarus, come out!”

Our people are dying of words. Prophecy to the bones on Sunday.