Heavenly Father who has entrusted us with the work of your Kingdom,

Continually teach and invigorate us with your Holy Spirit. May each of us be faithful messengers with good news from the King of Kings, namely, that we are adopted into the family of God because of the life, death and resurrection of your Son.

Bless the work we have heard, discussed and done today. Let our zeal for your kingdom never lag.

We ask that you guard on their way those of us returning to our homes. Guard and keep our loved ones, especially those far from us this evening. Grant a sleep made peaceful by the reconciliation won by your Son, so that tomorrow we rise, eager to do your will in the various stations of our lives. Amen.

Nehemiah 8:1-12 For Dis. Conference, June 11, 2019, Evening Devotion

**Let Our Language March with the Times**

**Nehemiah 8:8 They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read.**

“Lay – Lie,” “Sit – Set,” “Like – Love.” I remember those well. Was it fourth grade? I nailed sit/set. Lay/lie was trickier but I eventually got it. But the like/love thing—I had issues with my teacher. Miss Wilkes insisted that I couldn’t possibly “love” my dog. “That’s not what the word means…” she said. I was pretty sure that I did “love” my dog.

You see what was happening: language was changing. When my teacher grew up, “love” was an emotion reserved for interpersonal relationships, between human individuals. It was a tender word. Grown men were known to have never uttered it in their lives, not even to their own beloved children or spouse. There was much of reality mirrored in the old saw, “I told you I loved you when we got married. I’ll let you know if it ever changes.”

But then we were told that fathers need to tell their kids that they are loved. Maybe so. Maybe so. And then we got to loving ice cream and living room décor and even our dogs. Now the word “love” is everywhere. Yet I am not convinced that parents love their children any more than when the word was almost *verboten*.

There was a preacher who once said something I can’t get out of my mind: “Some things that are true when whispered, become untrue when shouted.”[[1]](#endnote-1) I wonder if the word “love” is one of those casualties?

What do people hear when you talk of the God of love? Do they hear—even though *your* intention is quite different—do they hear that God “loves” us so much that he just accepts and conforms to us and whatever we are like, and that all the rules he once set down in the Bible were spoken in a fit of divine unreasonableness some two to three thousand years ago? That’s what some people hear when you talk about a loving God. Do you clarify what you mean, at least once in a while?

Other words travel the opposite direction. Some reverse the journey from the everyday to the unspeakable. Oh, sure, you still hear the word, but whenever the word “sin” is used in public parlance, it is used with almost the opposite heft it once had. It is usually used in connection with officious and legalistic people: “I got fired for committing the sin of disagreeing with my boss.” “Sin” has been relegated to the sarcastic and satirical. But use “sin” to talk about my own real moral filth, that I ought to be ashamed of myself for my behavior, even my thoughts, and that my “sin” is such a stench rising to heaven that an Almighty Creator of the Universe notices it and has a perfectly reasonable right to damn me to hell—that definition of “sin” has become the 21st century’s four letter word.

Even for confessional Lutherans, “sin” sticks in our throats. As we confess our sins Sunday morning, our easily distracted minds start thinking, “Those visitors I saw in the second row from the back, I wonder what they are thinking when they hear us confessing our sins, admitting that we deserve ‘nothing but God’s punishment, both now and in eternity.’ Maybe I should re-word that?”

“Sin” is a word we are at least tempted to avoid specifically because it *is* a word that people still understand.

We have to change the way we speak. Language evolves. Who, who is really concerned about the soul of the man on the street, who wants to give God’s Great Exchange in King James’ English? So we change. Yet as we change, we must be alert. It can happen that in marching with the times we give spongy meanings to once solid words, and tip-toe around or eliminate others that we really shouldn’t be toying with.

Lord, forgive me. Forgive me when I play with language to accommodate my human weakness, my desire for acceptance, and to aspire to worldly measures of success. Lord, forgive me for my unintentional yet too-real sins of not asking myself if people really hear what your word means. That is my called, my sworn duty as a spiritual watchman. And I fail daily!

In the time of Nehemiah, when some people heard God’s Law for the first time in a long time, maybe ever, do you know what they did? *“All the people [were] weeping as they listened to the words of the law.”* That’s what happens whenever I hear what God wants and truthfully compare it with what I have done. I am led to ask myself, “How can anyone get to heaven with someone like me proclaiming God’s word!!!”

And there I must simply hear and accept a gift from God that I don’t deserve. I look at and desire that gift and yet feel so unworthy that I almost push it away. How could Jesus purchase it so dearly? How can God give it freely? Why does the Holy Spirit present it to me so persistently? And then finally, not even able to look God in the eye for shame, I stop pushing away that gift of forgiveness won on tortured cross, and I pull it close and treasure it.

God help us to communicate clearly God’s word in every generation! Especially that message of our sin and God’s love.

**[Read Nehemiah 8:1-12]** This is the word of God.

1. As I remember it from somewhere in Fred Craddock, uncertain of page or volume. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)