

## Voices of Influence

Genesis 3:1-7

January 29, 2017

Sixteen thousand – is a pretty big number, and it seems even bigger when realizing that experts have determined that on average, that's how many words we speak each day. Now if this is the number of words actually spoken, can any of us imagine how many unspoken words are battling for space in our minds. Even without an average number of unspoken words, I believe it safe to say most of us are bombarded by words:

Words we speak;  
Words we don't; and  
Those of others spoken around us.

Even thinking about that leaves me feeling a bit overwhelmed.

So what kinds of words are we hearing. Well research shows that most of the words are not even facts, but are evaluations and judgments mixed with emotions. Some of these words are positive and helpful - (I've worked hard and I can ace this presentation; This issue is worth speaking up about), while others are negative and possibly harmful - (He's purposely ignoring me; I'm going to make a fool of myself; I'm a fake). And make no mistake, the positive and negative nature of your words and of the words you hear have incredible impact on you and those around you.

Did you know that neuroscientists have recently discovered that anything negative, fearful or hateful sticks to the mind like Velcro and you can feed it for days, weeks and months? While anything positive, happy, joyous or loving bounces off unless you take a minimum of 15 seconds to savor it. This is why we might find ourselves saying we have had an awful day when the reality is only 1 of the 100 things said to us during the day was negative and 99 were positive.

Think about that, we are hardwired so that negativity, fear and hatefulness make an immediate imprint on our brain, but positivity, happiness, joy and love bounce off unless we take action to make sure they don't. Friends, do we really need any more proof that the voices we hear and the words being spoken matter.

This may be why we need constant reminders that we are the beloved children of God, created in God's loving and merciful image. You see,

God is Love,  
God is Good,  
God is Joy,  
And so are we. That is how we were created.

God cares more about others than self.  
God actions are always rooted in Love.  
God has always sought reconciliation and justice for all.

Living in pursuit of these values is within all of us too. If we claim God's blessing on our lives and let it direct our actions and values then our words and actions will be helpful to self and others, never just to self.

Our words and actions will be rooted in acts of love toward others.  
And our words and actions will always seek reconciliation and justice for all.

If, on the other hand, we never take time to savor the goodness of being created in God's image, then negativity, selfishness, fear and hate might take over our minds, even though our created image is the opposite. We must resist the voices that want to define our existence with negative connections to human sinfulness. With minds so easily drawn to negativity like moths drawn to a flame, voices of love, mercy and grace are critically important. This is why stories of grace poured out from one to another must be told and re-told. This is why I want this place to become a place where everyone experiences GRACE ON TAP. This is who we are no matter what the negative, fearful, hate-filled voices might say. You see, this is the voice of truth about all of us, and it is this voice that should influence our lives.

### *The Voices of Freedom & Vulnerability*

The longer I study today's scripture, the more I begin to see how important it is that we start the story of creation before Chapter 3 because Chapters 1 and 2 tell us that humanity was Originally blessed by being created in God's image. If we start our story in Chapter 3 then we miss this Original Blessing and reduce our creation to this idea called "Original Sin", that humans are born into a sinful nature. When we do this we do God, ourselves, and those around us a disservice.

Now, make no mistake, even without the help of neuroscientists, I understand why people can gravitate to such a negative understanding of humanity. If you have lived long enough, you have probably experienced pain and heartbreak at the hands of another human being. I know I have and at times those experiences are hard to talk about, even for things that happened 10 or 15 years ago. I have even lived with a feeling of bitterness at times due to how badly I was treated and how vicious some people can be toward others. Trust me, I know how easy it is to get sucked into a life of negativity.

Luckily, as far back as I can remember, I have tried to be a positive optimistic person. Both about myself and especially about others. No matter what I have always known that we are all beloved children of God created in God's image of love, grace and mercy. This is our original blessing and I long for us to reclaim it. By starting the story there, we can begin to see how we were created to live in relation to God and each other the way God intended and deeply desires.

So in chapter 2 of Genesis we find God and man existing together in relationship with each other. This is a mutually beneficial relationship with each having specific purposes. God's is that of Creator and man's is that of caretaker. Amazingly God entrusts the care of all that God creates to man. Gen. 2:15, "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it." Then after giving the instructions to freely eat from every tree in the garden, except from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, God noticed something was missing. Gen. 2:18 "Then the LORD God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone...'" So as the Creator, God created every animal of the field and every bird of the air.

Remember, creating was God's purpose, so you know what God did with all the animals and all the birds? God brought them all to the man to see what he would call them and whatever the man called them became their name. That is utterly amazing to me. After fulfilling the limited role of creating, God backed off and never attempted to control or influence the man's naming of the animals and birds.

Now why is this so important you might be asking? The significance is because naming has always been a way of exercising control and influence. The fact that God wanted to see what the man would do and was accepting

of the man's decision is monumental if we want a better understanding of the essence of God's love and what it might mean for us to be created in God's image.

Through this particular exchange, we see aspects of Freedom and of Vulnerability, both of which allow us the opportunity to discover more about God and more about ourselves. We can also learn how we are to live in relation to God and in relation to others. God consistently chooses to become vulnerable in relation to the man. First in giving the man a purpose and the freedom to fulfill that purpose and then in letting the man exercise an act of control or influence over God's creation. God demonstrates what it means to freely self-limit in order to engage in authentic relationship with others.

### *The Voice of Temptation*

So, on the heels of the incredible powerful story of authentic communal relationship built on freedom, vulnerability and love, we are introduced to the crafty tempter called the serpent, and for reasons we don't really know, he wants to mess it all up by manipulating and exploiting the woman. Have you ever wondered if the serpent knew that being created in God's image meant that all of humanity has some vulnerabilities? I certainly have because the serpent immediately begins exploiting. And in a matter of seconds, what seems like a good nature conversation becomes something more. As always when dealing with the retelling of someone else's story, some statements are exaggerated and some things are added, and for those seeking to exploit the vulnerable, the door has now been opened wide.

You see, this is what serpents do, they lie in wait and strike only when the time is right. Somehow the serpent knew the limitation God had previously given the man because the serpent attempted to broaden or re-define it, just not to the person with first-hand knowledge. We can see the craftiness of the serpent in his choosing to befriend the woman, not the man because the woman only heard about God's command from the man, not from God. In this way, the woman only had second hand knowledge.

In choosing her, the serpent could exaggerate God's command. He wanted his voice to influence her, and it worked. The serpent took advantage of the situation. He lied and his lies influenced the woman's decisions. Maybe without even fully understanding what was happening, she made choices in

response to the serpent's voice. This is what serpents do, they lie in wait and strike only when the time is right.

This is never how it should be for those claiming belief that they are created in God's image. Because to really claim this means:

You choose not to exploit others in selfish ways;  
You choose to have a listening heart in your approach to others;  
You choose to limit yourself in each and every relationship.

### *What Now?*

If we embrace the idea that humans are not originally sinful but rather originally created in God's image, with the ability to choose good, choose love, choose mercy, choose grace, then how we live our lives must change.

So when we think about our everyday encounters with others, with our spouse, our parents, our child, our co-worker, shouldn't we ask ourselves:

Are we exploiting them in selfish ways, or are we seeking ways to be mutually beneficial?

Do we have a listening heart, or are we trying to control the situation?

Do we speak or act in an attempt to control them, or do we limit ourselves?

My brothers and sisters, as we leave here today:

May we strive to reclaim our original blessing of being created in God's image.

May we resist the temptation of those voices calling us into a negative understanding of ourselves and others, and

May the voices of love, mercy and grace become the voices of influence on our lives.

Amen!