

The Wired Word

Student Handout

Sunday, January 17, 2021 --- from 9:00-9:45am

Zoom ONLY

Meeting ID: 860 8980 7220 --- Passcode: 195152

Dear Class Member,

Many Americans and others were stunned and dismayed when some supporters of President Trump rioted and violently broke into the U.S. Capitol on January 6. Early the next morning, after a joint session of Congress completed the certification of the Electoral College vote verifying that Joe Biden is the president-elect, Senate Chaplain Barry Black offered a closing prayer in the joint session, filled with timely petitions to Almighty God. In his prayer was a reminder that words matter. So that will be the topic of our next class.

How To Participate:

We are offering *The Wired Word* class live via Zoom. *The Wired Word* Zoom discussion will be from 9:00am-9:45am on Sunday mornings. You can also use these resources to reflect or study on your own, with your family/friends, and/or with your Abide Group.

Until further notice, there is NO in-person Sunday school due to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

You can participate in *The Wired Word* virtually by Zoom on your computer or smart device at:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86089807220?pwd=eStWa0ZZK0hOTVdwU0pjZlMrdk5ydz09>

or by telephone (land line or cell phone) by calling: 1-301-715-8592

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For other learning opportunities through St. Paul's UCC go to: <http://www.sprucc.org/classes.html>

To subscribe or unsubscribe for the **free** weekly mailing of *The Wired Word* student handout, please contact the church office at Office@sprucc.org.



Words Have the Power of Life and Death, Senate Chaplain's Prayer Reminds Us

The Wired Word for the Week of January 17, 2021

In the News

It ended with a prayer.

On Thursday morning, January 7, a joint session of Congress concluded its work and certified Joe Biden as the president-elect. This was a notable conclusion, since Congress' work had been interrupted the day before by angry protestors in support of President Donald Trump's attempt to overturn his defeat in the election. They violently broke into and overran the Capitol building aiming to prevent that very outcome.

As best as we at *The Wired Word* understand the overall motivation of the rioters, they, like the president, believed that Biden's electoral victory was due not to a legitimate election, but to voting fraud and wanted the election overturned. (For more on this, see item #3 in the "For Further Discussion" section below.) Of course, in the large crowd, there may have been people with other motivations as well, which we are not able to know.

Also, though thousands of people attended the rally, many did not participate in the riot. (We have stated this judging from the photos and news videos from the day. *The Wired Word* has been unable to find any figures about what percentage of those in attendance actually joined the mob action.)

It took over three hours for Capitol Police, assisted by the local D.C. Metropolitan Police Department to retake control of the Capitol, using riot gear, shields, smoke bombs and batons. By the end of the day, police had arrested 61 people for "unrest-related" offenses, with about half of these arrests occurring on the Capitol grounds.

Five people died during the riot, which was labeled a "failed insurrection" by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. A woman among those invading the Capitol, Ashli Babbitt, was shot by police as the mob tried to break through a barricaded door in the Capitol, and three more in the crowd outside had unspecified medical emergencies leading to their deaths. A Capitol Police officer, Brian Sicknick, who was defending the Capitol building, was hit in the head by a rioter with a fire extinguisher, and later died from his injuries. Investigations into Babbitt's and Sicknick's deaths have been opened by the federal government. (A second Capitol police officer who responded to the riot, died by his own hand three days later, though it's not clear if his suicide was in any way connected to the riot.)

Thus, at the conclusion of the congressional joint session, when the Senate chaplain, Barry C. Black, closed the session with prayer, his words were no perfunctory pronouncement.

"Lord of our lives and sovereign of our beloved nation," Black, a Seventh-day Adventist minister and retired Navy rear admiral, began, "we deplore the desecration of the United States Capitol building, the shedding of innocent blood, the loss of life, and the quagmire of dysfunction that threaten our democracy."

Black then turned to some lessons of the stunning events of the preceding day. "These tragedies have reminded us that words matter and that the power of life and death is in the tongue. We have been warned that eternal vigilance continues to be freedom's price."

He also petitioned the Lord to help us "remember that we need to see in each other a common humanity that reflects your image," and to bring "healing and unity to our hurting and divided nation and world."

And Black thanked God "for what you have blessed our lawmakers to accomplish in spite of threats to liberty." (See Black's full prayer in the 2KUTV link below and in this lesson's closing prayer.)

More on this story can be found at these links:

['The Power of Life and Death Is in the Tongue,' Senate Chaplain Says in a Powerful Prayer Calling for Unity. *The New York Times*](#)

[Following Violent Day, Senate Chaplain Delivers Prayer. 2KUTV](#)

[Utah Activist Inside U.S. Capitol Says Woman Killed Was First to Try and Enter House Chamber. *Deseret News*](#)

Applying the News Story

Words matter.

If there is anything we've learned from the sorry events of January 6, it is that words matter, especially when they come from a powerful individual with a large base of supporters who take seriously everything he says, even when his claims are unsupported by sufficient evidence.

As Chaplain Black said in his prayer, the tragedies of January 6 "have reminded us that words matter and that the power of life and death is in the tongue."

For most of us, this is not new information; we understand the power of words, But in the current hostile bipartisan climate of our nation, it is especially important that we remember that. We need to, so far as is possible, seek the truth about what we hear and not allow ourselves to be conduits of misinformation or foot soldiers in efforts to weaken the fabric of what holds us together as a nation.

We are indeed a people "standin' in the need of prayer."

The Big Questions

1. What steps do you take, if any, to determine the truth of outrageous claims people around you may accept as fact? How do you recognize when you are only receiving one-sided reports? What are some ways you can then seek explanations of the other side?
2. If you consider yourself to be a follower of Jesus, how should this show in things you say? The claims you pass on to others? The efforts you make to determine the truth of what others say to you?
3. In a bipartisan climate, how important is it to read or listen to news as interpreted by media outlets that tend to be voices of views different from your own -- as well as to outlets that are more in line with your views?
4. What, if anything, have you found helpful in controlling your tongue?
5. It's possible for people to have different interpretations of the same facts. However, when friends, family or fellow church members make statements that appear to have no basis in reality, do you feel it important to address these statements? And if so, how do you do it? Is it possible to engage in dialog in which you hold your ground and refuse to accept the premise you consider untrue, and yet remain friends, family and fellow church members?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Proverbs 18:21

Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruits. (For context, read 18:20-21.)

When Chaplain Black said in his prayer that the power of life and death is in the tongue, he was alluding to this proverb. *The Message Bible* accurately renders this verse as "Words kill, words give life; they're either poison or fruit -- you choose."

Questions: When you are speaking, are you ever aware of making a poison-or-fruit choice? On those occasions when you have discovered that what you believed was wrong, what steps do you take to correct yourself to others?

James 3:1, 5-6, 9-10

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ... So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. ... With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. (For context, read 3:1-12.)

In some ways, James is stating the obvious about the power of words (which he shorthands as "the tongue") -- in terms of both the good and the evil they can do. But there are many times when we need to be reminded of the obvious, because as we use words every day, "careful use" is not continually in the forefront of our minds. Our connection to information and thoughts can be emotional, and emotion has the power to override reason and careful use of words. Clearly, James would agree with Chaplain Black: "The power of life and death is in the tongue."

In reading James 3:1-12, it's easy to skip over verse 1 -- the comment about teachers -- especially if we are not teachers ourselves. In fact, we may even wonder why James prefaced his comments about the tongue by first talking about teachers. But "teachers" should be heard broadly as referring to anyone who has the power to influence others

with his or her words. That clearly applies to people in positions of political leadership, including especially a president who has a large and loyal base. But it also applies to us who are parents, mentors, natural leaders and those who are outspoken or otherwise influential.

Questions: How does James' reference to the tongue as a fire help you understand his point about the power of words? In the full reading James also compares the tongue to a ship's rudder and a horse's bit. How do each of those enlarge his point? What other comparisons might you add? How is it possible for human beings to both praise God and curse those who are made in his likeness? Where is that question reflected in Black's prayer?

Exodus 20:16

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. (For context, read 20:1-17,)

You no doubt recognize this as one of the Ten Commandments. Most Bible scholars say that the immediate application of this commandment had to do with telling the truth in legal proceedings, but most interpreters say that it also has application to the whole realm of truth-telling.

The Hebrew word underlying "false" is *sheqer*, which means "deceitful," "deceptive" or "manipulative." The Hebrew word rendered as "witness" is a contraction of the Hebrew word *'ud*, which means to "duplicate" or "repeat"(and by implication to "testify" as by reiteration). So one valid translation of this commandment is "You shall not bear manipulative repetitions against others.

One implication of that rendering is a command against gossiping, but another way to hear it today is as a warning against passing along information (as via social media) about which we have not ascertained the truth. If it turns out to be false (or even true but unnecessarily inflammatory), it is at least potentially manipulative as others may act on it. Thus, we need to do the best we can to ensure the truthfulness and helpfulness of what we repeat. Manipulative untruths were part of what rallied the mob that stormed the Capitol.

When we are thinking of passing information along, it's a good idea to ask ourselves what our intentions are. Are we repeating *for* or *against* someone? Is it our hope to do good or harm?

Questions: Have you ever acted on information someone passed to you, only to find out later it was incorrect or unnecessarily hurtful? How did you feel about that? Have you ever passed on information that you later learned wasn't true? How did you feel about that?

In this age of social media, it's easy to pass along items because they please you, only to discover later that they are false. Were you able to retrieve or retract these statements?

John 1:1

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (For context, read 1:1-14.)

The New Testament was originally written in Greek. The Greek word translated into English here as "Word" is *Logos*. John wrote his gospel to communicate the divine identity of Christ to the larger world, including non-Jews who wouldn't be familiar with Jewish terms like "Messiah." So John selected *Logos* as a term to gather up the essence of Jesus. *Logos* is speech. In effect, John told his readers that Jesus came as God's "talk" or "message" to the world.

Jesus was -- and is -- of course, redemptive talk, the Word of salvation.

Questions: When did Jesus become the Word of God to you? What does Jesus' identity as Word/*Logos* require from us who follow him? What does it mean to you that in Christianity, truth is not fully contained in a doctrine or creed but, rather, truth is a person, Christ Jesus?

For Further Discussion

1. Respond to this, from TWW team member Henry Brinton's sermon for January 10: "There are Christians of good faith who support President Trump, appreciating his Supreme Court nominations and policies around taxation and deregulation. Our democracy is only strengthened by vigorous debate around such matters.

"But what happened this past Wednesday goes beyond political positions to remind us of the awesome power of words. Words can build up, and words can break down. Words can create peace, and words can cause violence."

2. React to this, from [this article](#): "We have an emotional relationship to information. It is not rational,' [Claire Wardle, the executive director of First Draft, a group that researches and combats disinformation] said. But people who work in the 'quality information space,' Wardle's term for journalists, scientists, researchers and fact checkers, still often act as if information-processing were fundamentally rational, rather than deeply tied to feelings and the way a person expresses their identity."

3. Consider that not only do words matter, but so does a lack of words. One's belief concerning the recent election's integrity depends mainly on the words people have spoken and written and that one has heard or read and believed.

Claims of voting irregularities began to be reported by some right-leaning news outlets on the morning after election day. Those first reports of ballot counts changing after poll watchers were excluded, statistically unlikely distribution of vote counts and the like, caused some people to believe that voting fraud was rampant.

On the other hand, mainstream news sources were quick to proclaim Biden the victor and trumpet election integrity.

Those who mainly obtained their knowledge of events only from one or the other of those sources heard only the story that source reported -- and mention of alternate claims were branded as falsehood or wishful thinking. (Following the claims of widespread fraud, election officials, regardless of their party affiliation, said there were no irregularities that affected the outcome of the election. In early December, then Attorney General William Barr, a Trump appointee, declared that the U.S. Justice Department had uncovered no evidence of widespread voter fraud that could change the outcome of the election.)

In the current viciously bipartisan political environment, people on various sides often repetitively condemn the other side's motivations and honesty. The political left brands President Trump as a "liar" or "deluded." He and others on the political right dismiss mainstream media as being purveyors of "fake news."

Consequently, many people have seen no examination of the dispute, and are likely to remain with their initial conception.

Words matter. So does suppression of words. Words can be used to manipulate as well as explain, to advocate as well as to oppress. Words can also be used to seek clarification and reveal where more thought is needed.

Nothing said here is to excuse the actions of the mob, but it is offered to provide a background for discussions with those with whom one disagrees politically.

4. In 1855 a woman named Beth Day wrote a little poem about this matter of repeating information about someone. It's called "Three Gates of Gold."

... Make it pass
Before you speak, three gates of gold.
These narrow gates. First, "Is it true?"
Then "Is it needful?" In your mind
Give truthful answer. And the next
Is last and narrowest, "Is it kind?"

And if to reach your lips at last
It passes through these gateways three,
Then you may tell the tell, nor fear
What the result of speech may be.

Day appears to have been primarily writing about gossip, but to what degree might her poem be applied to political and social viewpoints we pass along? Would all three tests still apply then? Why or why not?

5. Have you ever been aware that your words encouraged another to sin? When have you been aware that others' words caused you to sin?

6. [This article](#) tells what the other Capitol chaplain -- the chaplain of the House of Representatives -- did during the riot. Read the article and say what impressed you about her work.

Responding to the News

This is an important time to pray for our republic, seeking to understand those who view our life together differently from how we do, and using our words, especially those in political discussions, with generosity and good will, always in pursuit of truth and, wherever possible, common ground.

Prayer (From Barry Black, Chaplain of the U.S. Senate, January 7, 2021)

Lord of our lives and sovereign of our beloved nation, we deplore the desecration of the United States Capitol building, the shedding of innocent blood, the loss of life, and the quagmire of dysfunction that threaten our democracy.

These tragedies have reminded us that words matter and that the power of life and death is in the tongue. We have been warned that eternal vigilance continues to be freedom's price.

Lord, you have helped us remember that we need to see in each other a common humanity that reflects your image.

You have strengthened our resolve to protect and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies domestic as well as foreign.

Use us to bring healing and unity to our hurting and divided nation and world. Thank you for what you have blessed our lawmakers to accomplish in spite of threats to liberty.

Bless and keep us. Drive far from us all wrong desires, incline our hearts to do your will and guide our feet on the path of peace. And God bless America. We pray in your sovereign name. Amen.