

# The Vintage Voice

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## “Words Writ Large...”

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In the play, *My Fair Lady*, Eliza Doolittle, a London flower vendor, gets very exasperated with Freddy Enysford-Hill, who is apparently inexhaustibly verbose about his love for her. Finally she cries out, “Words, words, words, quit talking about love and show me!” I suppose that spiritually we all are from Missouri, the “show me” state. We want our actions to match our words, the practice to match our preaching, our walk to match our talk. Nevertheless, from Genesis 1 on, it’s all the Word! Over and over again, we read, “and God said,” “the word of the Lord came to me,” “Hear the word of the Lord,” and similar declarations.

We live in a world of words. Words, symbols, signs, language, all make us human and able to communicate with each other. I cannot imagine a world without such words as hot, cold, yield, stop, listen, war, peace, and the comparatively new vocabulary words: digital, pixels, bit, byte, mouse, gigabits. One day, as a small child on an elementary school playground, I was the recipient of some very nasty words (mostly, as I recall, about my immediate ancestors). My teacher tried to soften the blow by saying to me:

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.”

She meant well, but she was terribly wrong. After just about four decades of pastoral experience, I have learned the power of words! Words can indeed hurt, even destroy:

“I never really loved you.” “I hope you drop dead.” “My parents warned me about marrying you.” “Why can’t you be like your older sister?” “We knew you would never amount to anything!” “You made your bed, now lie in it.”

Of course, life is also made good and beautiful with words:

“I love you.” “I am so glad you are you.” “Welcome home!” “I forgive you.” It’s going to be okay.” “You have been accepted at the college of your choice.” “The cancer is in remission.”

Words can both hurt and heal, sometimes in combination! Through hurt and pain comes healing and wellness. Not all words are simple; sometimes they are like Saint Paul’s two-edged sword: A painful edge and a growing edge.

I have been happily retired now for about three years, and I have had to learn to use a different word (two-edged) to describe myself after almost four decades of saying, “I am an Episcopal parish priest from such and such parish.” I now add the word *retired!* I retired from a position (rector); I did not retire from life and surely not from the priesthood. (No bishop asked me to return my ordination certificates and cease from functioning as a priest!) But the word “retire” somewhat bothers me. I looked it up in the dictionary and didn’t derive much comfort. Suggested meanings include “withdrawing,” “retreating as from a battlefield,” “going to bed,” and “striking out as a batter.” One gets the impression that retirement is related to defeat, sleep and failure — in that order! There is not a proactive nuance in the lot. I may be forced to create a new word for this state of being!

The quotation from Psalm 110:4 that was inscribed on a book given to me as an ordination gift 36 years ago, reads:

“You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.”

I know Melchizedek is a shadowy historical figure of which not much is known, and the meaning of this little bit of psalm is still inexplicable to me. But it is somehow still a reminder of how wonderful and enduring it is to be a priest in the Church of God! Ordination does not wear off in time. What a wonderful word priest is! I am reminded of the complaint of the English during Oliver Cromwell’s anti-Anglican regime: “Methinks new presbyter is but old priest writ large.” Modifiers of that writ-large priesthood are myriad: parish, chaplain, non-stipendiary, rural, diocesan...retired! Wasn’t it Shakespeare’s Juliet who lamented, “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”

Words! Words! Words! If old Melchizedek can be both king and priest, why can’t I be both priest and retired? I am simply working out, living out, and discovering what the two words — together — mean! Methinks “retired priest” may just be another case of “priest writ large!”



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