

The Power of Words

Every time we left the house as teens and young adults, my dad's parting words to us were "remember you're a Labmeier (our family name)." Those few words carried a lot of weight. They meant that we were to be kind, respectful, and responsible. Being a "Labmeier" was something we were expected to live up to—it was part of our DNA.

When I was working years ago in a chemical dependency treatment center, I passed by a young woman shouting and swearing on the telephone. When I spoke with her later, I reminded her of that occasion and told her that she was "better than that." A few days later I saw her on the phone beginning to shout and swear when suddenly she stopped herself. "I'm better than that," she said and began to handle the conversation in a calm and respectful way.

Another young man struggled with what he was learning and relapsed soon after he completed treatment. I heard from him a few weeks later. He had been drinking and called to let me know that I had ruined his "high." He wanted to know what to do. We went over what he had learned and he got back on the road to recovery. Those words he heard in treatment set his life on another path.

I've also had the occasion to meet people in public settings who came up to me and asked "Do you remember what you said to me?" Though I might have long ago forgotten what I had said those words made a difference though I was unaware of their power. It was one of those times when I felt God at work in and through me.

Years ago I learned a very important lesson from an English professor. He told us that "every paper deserves first a commendation, then a recommendation." How different it would be if first we affirmed before offering input. I'm working on a community committee that is trying to involve business owners in dealing with hot spots that seem to attract criminal activities. While some want to confront right away and demand change, it simply won't work. Affirming them for participating, getting their input and perspective, opens the door to

collaboration and growing relationships. We then earn the right to be heard.

Words carry great power. They can bring life and also deal death. St. James describes it this way. *With the tongue we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing* James 2:9

I recently went to the funeral of an amazing Rwandan woman who had experienced torture and imprisonment during the genocide in that country. She came as a refugee just a couple years ago and died from an aggressive brain tumor. Many would say that she certainly had the right to be angry and rant and complain as the result of all she had experienced. But that was not her choice. One of her daughters captured her mom's spirit in the eulogy and said her mother would instead say, "Be kind to one another. Be kind."

In this year of mercy may we follow her example and let our words be sweet, affirming, and gentle. These kinds of words bring life, wholeness, and celebration.

- Angela Anno, Pastoral Associate

