

1

This morning I begin with a riddle: What is something that weights very little, but few people can hold it? ... More about that later.

My daughter first introduced me to Wordle, a game that invites me to guess a five-letter word within six tries. As I choose each word, Wordle lets me know the correct letters I've guessed and whether they are in the proper location. Through trial and error and a bit of word sleuthing, I most often get the word in four guesses. Sometimes it takes all six guesses, though at times I've used all my guesses and couldn't figure out the word. My best game occurred when I completed Wordle in one guess!

The progress of the game often depends on the first word used, so I often try to use a word with as many vowels as possible. Sometimes I use a word that just comes to me, such as *grace*, which this week led me to the word *liver* in five guesses. Although I began with a word that I really like, it led me toward a word that I find distasteful. Another Wordle player texted, "I started with the lovely word *beach* only to get yucky *liver!*"

I doubt the psalmist had a word game in mind when writing Psalm 52, but he did recognize the importance of choosing one's words carefully. This is a unique psalm in that it barely addresses God, for most words are aimed at a deceitful person. While most psalms feel like a prayer, this one seems more like a ranting critique against an enemy. Translations of the psalm begin by addressing a "mighty one" or a "powerful person,"¹ while another chose the words, "Why do you brag of evil, "Big Man"?²

Later editors often added headings to psalms, and sometimes they provide a context that might shape the interpretation of the psalm. In the case of Psalm 52, the heading indicates "A *Psalm* of David, when Doeg the Edomite came and told Saul, and said unto him, David is come to the house of Ahimelech."

Reference to Doeg connects us back to the book of 1 Samuel, which contains a story about the massacre of religious leaders stemming from lies and deception and misunderstandings. The deceptions and choice of words led to many deaths. How many times does that continue to happen today—using words of half-truth in

2

order to maintain power and control at the expense of innocent lives?

The psalmist, who the heading suggested was by or about the famous King David, said his enemy had done mischief and plotted destruction. The writer said that the enemy spoke lies with deceitful words and used his tongue like a sharp razor.

Have you ever thought of your tongue as a sharp razor? Let's think about our tongues for a moment. We use it every day, and I imagine that most of us take it for granted. You may already know that it's composed of tiny taste sensors that help us detect sweet, sour, salty, and bitter. We probably enjoy that function of our tongues the most—it helps us taste the pleasant experience of ice cream and pizza.

Our tongues are composed of mostly muscle tissue, but it's not connected to our skeletal system like all the other muscles that help move our bodies. The tongue is free to move on its own, and sometimes a free-roaming tongue can create lasting destruction. Our tongues help us make 44 distinct sounds, allowing us speak our English language, and unfortunately, not all those words come out pretty.

Too many times we hear stories of children and teens who commit suicide after being bullied with name-calling and other violent actions. Children may sink into depression as their self-esteem shrivels from being called cruel names. Afraid to admit their trauma to others, they find the only way to escape the turmoil is through their own death.

We often think that kind of event happens elsewhere, but in Elkhart this year we learned of the death of 12-year-old Rio who was bullied at school and as a result, took her own life. Due to having a disease that attacked her hair follicles, her hair had fallen out and she wore a wig.³ Students teased her and pulled off her wig, and I imagine their tongues were full of destructive words. They chose their words, yet they did not consider the consequences of their choices.

Choosing our words carefully requires a bit of thought before speaking them. The early Quaker leader William Penn recognized the power of our words when he said, "If thou thinkest twice before thou speakest once, thou wilt speak twice the better for it."

Sometimes we may not always know what words to choose, for some may confuse the difference between

3

good and bad words, those that bring hope and those that bring destruction, as discussed on a call-in talk show.

The Baptist minister and author Will Campbell was on a...show to discuss one of his books. A woman called and asked him what — as a preacher — Campbell thought about the bad words his musician friend, Charlie Daniels, sometimes used on television.

“I don’t know, ma’am,” Campbell responded. “What did he say?”

“Well, I couldn’t repeat that,” the woman answered.

Campbell offered to say some bad words and invited her to indicate the bad ones with a yes or no. “Did he say ‘prejudice?’” he asked her.

“No.”

“War?” “Nuclear bomb?”

“Why, no.”

“If I don’t know what he said and you can’t tell me, I can’t very well express what I think about it. Those are the worst words I can think of.”⁴

Maybe by now you have figured out the answer to the riddle I offered at the beginning: What weights only a few ounces but very few people can hold it? ... The tongue. I imagine many of us have experienced the power of our tongues, recalling times we may not always have chosen our words carefully enough.

Even in the encounter of poorly chosen words, Psalm 52 shifts at the end from the pain of destructive words to hope:

I trust in God’s faithful love
forever and always.

⁹ I will give thanks to you, God, forever,
because you have acted.

In the presence of your faithful people,
I will hope in your name
because it’s so good.

May you choose your words carefully, offering a blessing to the world that brings hope and healing, knowing that God is always present in the midst of the kindness of your words.

¹ Common English Version.

² Psalm 52:1, *The Message*.

³ www.wndu.com/2022/03/17/candlelight-vigil-12-year-old-north-side-middle-school-student/

⁴ HomileticsOnline.com, 6-17-22.