The four letters W-O-R-D brim with meaning and are central to what we understand of faith. In the Hebrew Scriptures, “word” is directly connected to creation, blessing, and power. In Genesis, God declares, “Let there be light, and there was light.” God’s spoken word brings life and light from nothingness. God speaks and creation comes into being. Men and women receive God’s blessing when words are spoken over them and likewise experience disappointment and pain when no word breaks the silence. At every turn W-O-R-D and words have within them the power to create, to bless, and to shape both the present and the future.

Some 500 years before our Lord’s birth, Isaiah speaks words to God’s people still reeling from Babylon’s destruction of Jerusalem and all the pain that followed. At the end of that brutal exile, Isaiah speaks for God saying “So shall my word be, that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I
purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” We of faith believe there is such a thing as “word power” that has shaped our past and is even now forming our present and future.

Jesus captured that idea in so many of his parables. None shines the light of word power brighter than the Parable of the Sower from Matthew’s gospel. First century grain farmers sowed their fields by scattering the seed on unplowed ground. The oxen team, pulling a crude plow would then turn the soil over, tilling the seed into the ground. In the parable, Jesus describes four different kinds of soil anyone in that part of the world knew well.

All unplowed fields revealed sections that were rocky, weed-infested, path-beaten, thorny, and fertile (even after they were tilled). The farmer’s job was not at first to evaluate the ground, but to scatter the seed and turn it into the ground. Notice in the story that generously sowing seed here and there, though tempered by risk, yielded an abundant crop from the good soil that made the more disappointing
results manageable. The story tells us the seed sown, the word spoken, yields its crop in God’s time and God’s way.

What if this parable of the sower is a metaphor for life? And if it is, how might my life and yours change if we captured the power of words and how they shape who we are and what we become? Let’s go with this and see where it takes us. A good place to begin is with an awareness of how many words we speak in any given day. One average, both men and women speak about 16,000 words a day. (Don’t we all know some that speak 126,000?) Now that’s a boatload of words! When you couple that number with the number of words we hear day after day, the total is a staggering 25,000-30,000 words passing through our lips and into our ears every day. We are a communicating, word-speaking, image forming, conversational people.

I wonder how many of our 16,000 spoken words lodge in our friends’ or colleagues’ or family’s minds as unforgettable. There is no way to establish that number, but I would venture a guess with you that
of all the words we speak and hear, only a few – a very few – are remembered 24 hours later, or the next week, or the following month, or for a lifetime. We bring to mind words captured with softness or affection. We remember always a loving teacher’s praise or a proud parent’s affirmation. The seeds of love sown in the ground of our youth bear fruit into our sunset years, yielding a rich harvest in every season of life. We speak thousands of words everyday. What if we found a way to seed more of our words with grace, joy, affirmation, encouragement, and vision?

Some words, sadly and painfully.. cannot seem to leave the corridors of our minds. Some words are like ugly graffiti, cruelly painted on the walls of our hearts. Some of those words are punctuated with abuse or ridicule, demeaning in tone and remembered with great pain.

The parable invites us to awareness that some words are painful. Some words have a sharp thorn’s edge to them …gouging deep wounds and scratching scars on the tender flesh of our souls. There are children
now in their 40’s or 60’s who cannot erase a parent saying to them, “You’ll never amount to anything” or worse. Criticism when appropriately shared can make us better at what we do. But some criticism is forged in the fires of sarcasm and cruelty. Words can break us and leave us for dead.

The good news in our scriptures today is that good words always tumbles out of God’s mouth. This word power of which the Bible speaks finds its origins in the very being of God. God is the great wordsmith, the author of all creative and creating utterance, the speaker of life and the giver of meaning. Just as God spoke to weary captives centuries ago through the prophet Isaiah, so God speaks today through words of grace in the cadence of love. How so?

Right now, God is speaking through every aspect of our liturgy. The hearing and singing of music, the reading and hearing of Scripture, the preaching of the Word, the offering of our prayers, the gentle sharing of the peace, the sentences spoken over bread and wine, and later the
blessing all have a word power within them. Words spoken and heard here, in this place, brim with God’s life.

This word power received here has a life we can take with us. With the speaking of liturgy, we gather every memory of this time together, all the words spoken and heard, and take them with us in life’s journey. Right past the doors of this Church are men and women, colleagues and neighbors, whose tents may be pitched in the valley of the shadow of death. You, dears one, may be the person whose handful of words could offer them new life and hope.

Words taken up and taken on and taken out express the word power of the Gospel. Ours is a portable, moving, traveling faith propelled by words. Gospel words like “hope,” “grace,” “forgiveness,” “joy,” and “mercy” lighten our burdens and have in them the power to bless others. But we have to take them with us. These words must be sown, shared, given away knowing that God will bring a harvest in God’s time. 16,000 words a day? That’s a lot of words. What if we
carefully selected just a few and infused them with God’s love. And what if we shared those words with others? Do that this week. Sow those words and watch… just watch what God does.