

Words Matter

Presented by Russ Carson 08/25/209

Thomas Baker Clark was born in Maryland in 1779; died and was buried in Bellefontaine, Ohio in 1853; and this morning I'd like to tell you a little bit about his 74-year life. He studied for, and was ordained as, a Presbyterian minister. He married three times (sadly, all three wives died relatively young.), and fathered 10 children. His oldest son was named Thomas Marquis, his youngest daughter Elizabeth. We're going to hear more about both of them in a couple minutes. And he pastored or preached at numerous Presbyterian churches throughout Ohio.

To add just a little more detail to these bare-bone facts, in 1811 he was installed as Pastor of the Crabapple Presbyterian Church in St. Clairsville, a very small town just across the Ohio River from Wheeling W.V. While serving there, he also preached once a month at the Nottingham Mission Station, in an area about 15 miles from St. Clairsville that couldn't yet afford a full-time church. In a few minutes we'll also hear more about that Mission Station.

In 1829 he moved to Logan County, over in west-central Ohio, where he lived the rest of his life. During his years there he preached at the 1st Presbyterian Church of Findlay, the 1st Presbyterian Church of Ada, the Cherokee Run Church, the Riley Creek Church, and finally the Pleasant Valley Presbyterian Church of Bellefontaine.

Those are the broad brushstrokes of the life and times of Rev. Thomas Baker Clark. And right about now I wouldn't be a bit surprised if some of are thinking, "Well, OK, Russ, all this is mildly interesting, but where are we headed?" Well, it's full disclosure time. You see, Thomas Baker Clark was my third great grandfather. And, in addition to the mini biography I've just shared, we know an amazing amount about his life, due to the diligent genealogical work of my grandmother and mother, and to the wonders of Ancestry.com that I have delved into. Now, relax. Mercifully, I will not be inflicting all of it on you today, but I do

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want to share two more bits of information about him that will finally lead into, and I believe, exemplify, my topic today.

The first is drawn from this 176-year-old letter Clark wrote in 1843, jointly to his son, Thomas Marquis, (Remember him? By the way, he is my second great grandfather.) and to his previously mentioned daughter Elizabeth, who at the time was living with her brother's family in New Castle, PA. After sharing the latest news from Logan County, he gets to the real reason for the letter, a very stern lecture to Elizabeth. And I will quote, "Elizabeth, I expect to hear of the propensity of religion in your hands and especially that your attention has been turned to the subject. This is a subject of vital information and one on which most members make a fatal mistake. Examine it well, favor yourself by the word of God as to whether Christ has formed in you the hope of glory. I know the human heart is deceitful above all things, and that Satan sometimes changes himself into an angle of light for the purpose of deceiving and ruining precious souls. Now is the time for you to lay a clear and broad foundation on which to build your hopes for eternity. I should like to know something about your love affair. How was it terminated? It does not suit my views to learn of your present way of living. I should like to know something about your future and prospects." End of quote. Why don't you say what you really mean, Tom? Boy, he sure didn't mince words, did he?

Elizabeth was 20 years old at the time and for all we know may well have been the family wild child. In any event, Clark seems to be really out of sorts with her. What I take from the letter, however, is that Rev. Clark sounds like he might well have been a real old-fashioned, fire-and-brimstone, Bible-pounding minister who used strong words and the fear God as preaching tools.

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Did it work with Elizabeth? Well, sadly we don't know much about her life, so we just don't know. But we do know that Thomas Marquis, who certainly would also have read the letter, was an active life-long Presbyterian, as has been every succeeding member of that branch of my family tree, right down to yours truly, six generations later. So maybe it did have its effect felt after all. Who can ever really tell for sure the effect their words may have?

But . . . hold on, we have one last biographical tidbit that may put the good Reverend in an entirely different light. It's an extract from a history of the Nottingham Presbyterian Church, which is what that Mission Station we heard about earlier eventually grew into. I think you'll agree it's quite amusing, a bit instructional, and actually quite inspirational.

Again, I quote, "Thomas B. Clark, came into this vicinity in the spring 1811 and supplied the Mission Station every fourth Sunday for six years. His route to the Mission Station passed a flouring mill and he was often exceedingly annoyed by the running of the mill on the Sabbath, and was in the habit of reproofing the miller, Mr. Logan, for this desecration of the Lord's Day. On one occasion, when near the hour of public worship, discovering the mill was in operation, he stopped his horse and reflected for a moment on what was his duty. At length he dismounted and went into the mill to dissuade, if possible, his reckless friend from continued violation of both civil and Divine law. But Mr. Logan evaded the minister and ran out the back door, locking it behind him. He then came around and locked the other door, making (as he later explained) a prisoner of the parson, and keeping him confined until the hour of public worship had expired. Then Rev. Clark for a few minutes directed his discourse to the transgressor, and kindly remonstrated (I love that word, don't you?) kindly remonstrated with

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him on what was his duty in reference to the claim of God and the Commonwealth, and in view of his family and himself in the future. His exhortation was not lost, and the Lord succeeded the effort by the reformation of Mr. Logan, who became a warm friend of Rev. Clark, changed his life, and in a few months made a profession of faith under his ministry.” End quote. Well . . . what do we make of that? Apparently, the tough talking Reverend could also speak with persuasive kindness, when the situation seemed appropriate.

By now you can see where all this is headed. Words do matter. They can be powerful tools for good or evil. As Dana’s post eloquently says, they can surely wound, threaten, accuse, criticize, demean, and cause all manner of unnecessary pain and suffering. But, just as surely, they can also love, encourage, praise, inspire, heal, support, and act as a positive influence toward bettering the world and people around us. So, finally getting around to it, my actual message this morning is as short as my preamble was long-winded. It’s simply this. We, all of us, you and me together, are representatives of God’s church in the world. No, we’re much more than that, **we are God’s church in the world**. I don’t believe it is too strong a statement to say that, for good or ill, God speaks to the world through us, making everything we say matter. To repeat, **what we say matters. What we say can make a difference**, perhaps in just a single person or family’s life or, perhaps, even further beyond. We can never know for certain what affect our words may have, so we have an obligation to always choose them with great care.

Now, I know we all have excellent vocabularies containing many positive words and we all have a pretty good working understanding of how and when to use them, but, we’re human. Sometimes we forget, or we’re in a hurry, or we’re irritated, or tired, or distracted, or frustrated, or maybe we’re just simply not in the mood. It isn’t easy to

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retain that certain state of mind that reminds us to always try our best to speak with love, charity and compassion, no matter how great the occasional provocation might be to speak otherwise. We're cut off in traffic, someone ahead of us in the quick check-out line at Marcs has 25 items in their shopping cart, you all know what I mean! So, I'd like to close with an excellent piece of wisdom on *attaining*, and *maintaining*, that state of mind, and indeed on being a good Christian in general. It comes from the Second letter of the Apostle Peter, which appears way back toward the end of the New Testament. I'll be reading from the Revised Standard Version, Chapter 1, Verses 5 through 8.

“For this very reason make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and (finally) brotherly affection with love. For if these things are yours and abound, they will keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, brethren, be the more zealous to confirm your call and election, for if you do this you will never fail.”

Indeed, if we (all of us) do these 7 things we will surely never fail.

In Jesus name, Amen.