

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

What we say matters. What we choose to say matters. We are called to speak – to articulate – to give voice to Truth. What we say matters. Our words can give life, or deal death.

The letter from James, from which we've been reading for the past few weeks, is considered by many as "Wisdom Literature" of the New Testament – a collection of sayings or teachings, many of which parallel the sayings of Jesus from the Gospels. The writer is certainly concerned with encouraging his readers, and us, to live our lives according to the life of Jesus. The passage we have today gives pause to any of us who have been teachers in any form! "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." Indeed! - But we all, in one way or another, are teachers – to our children, to those around us, even if we never set foot in the front of a classroom. What we say – by word and example – matters. And what James has to say about the *power* of our words, the effect of our tongues – for good or bad – calls us all to task. The tongue, James tells us, has the power to direct us. Have you ever found yourself more convinced of a point of view simply because you spoke it out loud? Now it becomes a position you must defend! And how many of us here learned much of what we know through verbal repetition? Even in our church life, we hold the position that "Praying Shapes Believing" – or that what we speak together in our common prayer, the words in the Prayer Book, shape what we believe. What we say matters.

But this same tongue is a two-edged sword. James says, "With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so." This ought not to be so. But it is. And we see *clearly* that it is in today's Gospel.

Enter Peter. Peter - in response to the profound question from Jesus, “Who do *you* say that I am?” - articulates, gives word to, a truth that has formed in his heart: “You are the Messiah.” This is the first time in Mark’s Gospel that any of the disciples have referred to Jesus in that way. He’s not giving a response that he learned from Jesus. No, he’s speaking what was inside him.

And then comes the rub. What Peter meant by “Messiah” and what Jesus knows of what it is to be Messiah are different. And so when Jesus describes a different reality than what Peter had understood, when Jesus talks about suffering and shaming and death, Peter uses his tongue again – to “rebuke” Jesus – to say that Jesus is *wrong*. We aren’t told exactly what Peter said to Jesus – but it might well, in today’s parlance, have sounded something like, “What the hell are you talking about?” Peter stopped *listening* to Jesus, to the Word of God, and instead spoke out of what he *wanted* to be true. He stopped listening. And we should not speak until we have listened.

Our first reading is part of the third of four “Servant Songs” of Isaiah – describing the Suffering Servant of God. We heard, “The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher.” Another translation says, “God has given me a well-trained tongue...” The tongue of a teacher *should* be well-trained. And Isaiah tells us that his tongue has been trained because God also gave him an open ear – “to listen as those who are taught.” “Morning by morning,” we are told, the prophet listens to the voice of God. And the purpose of this well-trained tongue, this tongue of a teacher, is that he may “know how to sustain the weary with a word.”

The word “sustain” is important. We heard the word often in the weeks we reflected on Jesus as the Bread of Life and the manna in the wilderness. Both were assurances that God will *sustain* us. And so the prophet’s mission, the proper use of his tongue, is to *sustain* the weary with a word.

We can use our tongue to bless or to curse, to build up or tear down, to sustain or to shame.

It is no coincidence that readings from these “Suffering Servant” passages from Isaiah are used during Lent and Holy Week, because the Christian community came to see these passages as descriptive of Jesus. This morning, they speak to us of the consequences of speaking the Word of God. In today’s passage, the prophet says he gave his back to those who struck him, his cheeks to those who pulled out the beard. Pulling out a man’s beard was a way of shaming him – of saying he was no longer a man. When some of King David’s army were captured, their enemies pulled their beards from one side of their faces, and David told them to go into hiding until their beards grew out again, to avoid the shame. Beating a man achieved the same end – public shaming. “I did not hide my face from insult and spitting,” the prophet says. Yes, there are consequences to speaking the Word of God. If we follow the way of Jesus, it will lead to the cross – the supreme example of public shaming. It’s not an end to which most of us would aspire. Most of us, I think, are with Peter on this one. We want to follow the Messiah, but not *that* far!

Sometimes we are the ones *suffering* the consequences, but sometimes we are the ones inflicting those same consequences. Sometimes we are the ones doing the shaming.

Words – and how we use them – matter. I don’t have to use the “N” word to shame or degrade African Americans or say Mexicans are rapists. I can do it by simply implying that white European culture is superior in every way. I don’t have to post something homophobic or xenophobic or anti-Muslim on Facebook; I can simply fail to speak against it. I can use my tongue to bless or to curse. I can speak words that sustain the weary, or I can add to their weariness by failing to say anything. What wonders we could accomplish if we all set aside an hour each week to use our tongues, our words for good: To send a card to someone newly bereaved or someone depressed by chronic illness, to write a legislator, to call someone we “keep meaning to call” to reconnect. We are not all called to be martyrs, literally laying down our lives in some foreign land. But we are called to listen, and then to speak.

Today, let us pray for ears open to hear God’s word to us – in the voice of strangers or family, in the cries in the news, in the stillness of the quiet before we drift off to sleep. Let us pray for well-trained tongues – to bless the driver who cuts us off or the family member who irritates us or the politician we can’t respect, to speak truth to power, to sustain the weary. Mostly let us pray, as we did in our opening Collect, that the “Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts.”

Amen.

[Isaiah 50:4-9a](#) [Psalm 116:1-8](#) [James 3:1-12](#) [Mark 8:27-38](#)